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OR,

HUNTED DOWN BY A WOMAN.

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AUTHOR OF "WILD DICK TURPIN," "THE GOLD
DRAGON," "COLORADO RUBE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT WAS THE MOTIVE?

THE bravest of men often get into trouble, and it was no discredit to Edgar Hendrickson that, beset by superior numbers, he was knocked senseless and placed at the mercy of his enemies, but neither he nor they suspected the strange, startling scenes which were destined to follow this assault, but which would not otherwise have occurred.

He was a detective; a clear-headed, keen-witted man of a practical turn of mind, devoted to his calling, and given to little thinking about other matters.

He had been on his way to the prison of the State where he lived, to see a convict, when he was set upon by tramps and left senseless.

When he recovered he was securely bound to a tree, gagged and helpless, and, as he could do

"GREAT HEAVENS!" THE ASTONISHED CONVICT GASPED, "FLORALICE HEATH!"

nothing else, he stood there and gazed angrily at vacancy. Appearances indicated that he would have a chance to stand and gaze all night.

He was less than a hundred yards from the prison, but the gag prevented a cry for help. He could only remain in the little grove on the river-bank and await the end.

Suddenly he heard something of great interest to him. All had been very quiet about his place of captivity, but the sound of voices broke the stillness all at once, and two men appeared in the grove.

Hendrickson could see them distinctly, though they did not see him. The bright moonlight shone full upon them, while he was in deep shadow.

At first he had been on the point of trying to make his presence known by such guttural sounds as he could make, but, closer view caused him to pause in wonder.

One of the two men wore the garments of a convict.

The detective could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes. What was the man doing there? It seemed almost incredible that he was there. Had he just made his escape? It was hardly possible, for the prison management was very careful and stringent.

Further speculations were interrupted by audible words from the convict. He and his companion had come to a halt, only a few feet from the bound detective, and he could plainly overhear all.

"Where are the other garments?" demanded the convict. "I want to get out of these as soon as possible."

"Why do you hurry me? Am I not doing well by you?" the second person asked.

"Well?" echoed the convict. "You are doing nobly, grandly! Words fail to express it, but my prayers will always be yours. You don't know what I have suffered, shut up in that living grave, but once more I breathe the free air of heaven. A thousand blessings rest upon you!"

His voice grew faint and husky, and he brushed his hand across his face.

"I suppose every prisoner there has his peculiar story," he added, "but mine was inexpressibly sad. Sorrow has been eating my life away; I suffered more in thinking of others than of myself. But once more I am free—may God bless you!"

He extended his hand, but his companion drew back.

"No!" he sharply said.

The convict's hand fell.

"I forgot," he said, humbly. "You have had mercy on me, but I still remain a criminal in the eyes of the world. I am branded and despised. You do right to refuse my hand; I do not blame you."

"Nonsense!" brusquely retorted the other. "Do you suppose I am so squeamish as to refuse your hand for such a reason as that, after having unlawfully liberated you from jail?"

"I supposed that to be your motive."

"It was not."

"May I ask what it was, then?"

There was a touch of real curiosity in the convict's voice, and he looked more closely at his companion.

Edgar Hendrickson, too, was using his eyes, and a singular suspicion was struggling in his mind.

Silence reigned for a moment, and then the second man made answer:

"Why do you suppose I set you at liberty?"

"You said it was because I looked like an honest man and you pitied me."

A short, harsh laugh came from the unknown.

"And did you believe it? Fool! you were never more mistaken. I released you because I hated you; because your insignificant term was almost expired, and you would soon be at liberty. I feared you would escape, and I gained position in the prison to be near and watch you, to release you exactly as I have done tonight."

Fierce and vehement was this strange address, and the convict brushed his hand confusedly across his face.

"I do not understand," he said.

"Fool!" cried his rescuer, "where are your eyes? Do you not see that I am in disguise? Are you still without a suspicion of the truth—that I am a woman?"

The convict started back.

"A woman!" he exclaimed.

"Ay, a woman, and one you ought well to know."

The speaker quickly removed the man's hat, and the moonlight fell plainly upon her head and face. Once more the escaped prisoner recoiled, and Hendrickson thought his face grew pale.

"Great Heavens!" the astonished convict gasped. "Floralice Heath!"

"Ha! you know me at last; you are not wholly blind. You know me—let me ask if you now shower blessings so freely upon me?"

Bitter indeed were the words, and she faced the man she had helped from prison, her head thrown back, her eyes flashing, and her air

that of a tragedy queen about to crush an enemy.

It was a thrilling picture to the man bound to the tree and he gazed in rapt amazement. He had forgotten to make any attempt to attract attention, and could only look in silent wonder. Who and what were these two persons who had come so suddenly to his notice?

Now that the disguise was revealed he could see that the leading speaker, instead of being a slender youth, was a tall, finely formed, imperious woman, and he wondered why she hated her companion so bitterly.

She hated him, yet she had taken him from prison. What strange motive had led to such an act?

The convict's head drooped humbly.

"I know that you blame me," he said, in an almost inaudible tone, "but I am no so much to blame as you think—"

Down came the delicate foot on the ground angrily, and she made a fierce gesture.

"The old tact for lying; the old air of injured innocence!" she retorted. "Do you think it deceives me? No, for I know you too well. You scoundrel! you cannot blind me with your arts."

"I have not tried."

"You look persistently at the ground. Are you plotting mischief? Are you thinking that because we are alone here and I am a woman, that I am in your power? If so, behold and change your mind!"

Another moment and a revolver was covering the convict's breast, held in her unwavering hand. It made Edgar Hendrickson start, but the menaced man calmly folded his arms.

"Shoot, if you wish!" he steadily said.

"Shoot! Do you suppose I would thus throw away my vengeance? Never! Not to save a kingdom. No, I have other plans, and you are to go with me."

"Why should I do that?"

"You will learn later. For the present you have nothing to do except to obey me, and the order is, Forward! You will march along the river-bank, and I shall follow with this revolver covering you. It will be useless for you to try to run or to overpower me. The revolver will settle all if you try. Now, march!"

The order was stern and inexorable, but he did not seem inclined to obey. His face bore a somewhat sullen expression, and a reply trembled on his lips, but once more her foot came down angrily on the ground.

"Not a word!" she exclaimed. "You have had your orders, and you will obey. Wait until you see what is wanted before you talk. Will you go?"

She advanced a step, giving the revolver a suggestive click, and after a brief hesitation the man turned and walked away in silence. She followed, keeping the weapon pointed at him, and thus the strange procession passed from Edgar Hendrickson's view.

He had made an effort at the last moment to attract attention, but neither noticed him.

Once more he was left alone.

He had more to think about than when he first found himself a prisoner, and might almost have thought himself the victim of a dream. It was a very unusual occurrence that he had been thus bound to the tree, and still more singular that a convict had been released without alarm, and so strangely released.

The interview he had overheard made a strong impression on Hendrickson's mind. He had gained no clew to the cause of the woman's enmity, but it could have been no common motive which led her to such a step.

Yet, the detective could hardly believe that the convict was such a villain as she claimed. He had been meek and quiet, with the air of a gentleman, while she had been fierce and vindictive.

"Here will be a case for me to work upon," Hendrickson thought. "I must solve the mystery—and I will, cost what it may. So her name was Floralice Heath? I must remember that, for though the record of the convict will probably be plain at the prison, her name may be the only clew. I shall surely take up the trail!"

And all through the night he thought of it, growing more interested, and wondering what could be the intentions of the woman who had done such a strange thing.

He was fortunate in being released at an early hour by a man who chanced along, and then he lost no time in hastening to the prison.

The hour was so early that the place was not fairly astir, but he was soon in the presence of the superintendent. The latter informed him that he knew of nothing wrong. Then Hendrickson told his story, and an immediate investigation was made.

It was found that three men were missing—Allen Gray, a convict; one of the watchmen, and a youth who had lately been given a clerical position in the prison. He had been known as Horace Ames.

Clearly, the watchman had been bribed, and then Ames, *alias* the Heath woman, had released the prisoner.

Men were at once sent to find the fugitives, while Hendrickson investigated Gray's case. He

had been serving a two-years' term for alleged forgery, but nothing whatever was known about him otherwise. The forgery had been of a simple nature, and did not seem to admit of any chance for a drama in which the woman could figure, but it had been generally believed that Gray had been serving under a false name.

Here was the stumbling-block to elaborate investigation when immediate capture of the run-aways had failed—and it did fail, signally—and Hendrickson, entering upon the case, found no light whatever.

The so-called Horace Ames had come to the prison as an employee, well recommended, apparently, but investigation showed that every recommendation was forged. Nobody had suspected that the quiet, obliging "young man" was a disguised woman, but it was now clear to all that she had come there with the express purpose of releasing Convict Allen Gray.

And for revenge! What revenge? Men are often consigned to prison because some one hates them, but rare, indeed, are the cases where they are released for such a reason.

What had been the motive of the woman, and what the revenge which she had hoped to secure?

It was a great mystery, and it grew more so as the days went by and no clew was gained to the whereabouts of woman or convict. They had suddenly, completely disappeared, and that, too, in the midst of a numerous population where escape seemed almost impossible.

Hendrickson devoted his time energetically to the case, still feeling that strong interest which the case had always had for him. He entirely forgot the wandering vagabonds who had assaulted and tied him to the tree—he cared nothing for them—but the mystery of the night haunted him.

Experienced detective that he was, he was long in getting a clew. Eight months wore away, and then the superintendent of the prison received this brief note:

"I am on the track and hope to solve the mystery but you need not prepare a cell for the escaped convict until you hear from me again. This may be some time later. EDGAR HENDRICKSON."

And then he, too, disappeared from the sight of those who knew him, and weeks and months passed. There were those who looked for letters from him, but none ever came.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUSKY PEOPLE OF THE PYRAMIDS.

BUCK BASIN was a small district in Kansas which was generally termed a valley, though it was but little below the general surface, and at the south the small river, locally known as the "Arrow," found easy exit and flowed on to join the great stream of which it was a tributary.

Its source was among the Pyramid Hills, or the Pyramids, as they were usually simply called—a wild locality west of the Basin. North and east, after a slight rise, the country stretched away in those vast prairies for which Kansas is noted.

Buck Basin village was not large, nor did it have that thriving air peculiar to the majority of Western towns. From the time the first house was built on the bank of the Arrow river, there had been a curse on the place, and it showed in the houses, the land, the faces and dress of men, women and children—in every way.

With an iron barrier to prosperity, Buck Basin merely existed, and dissatisfaction reigned throughout the place. Poverty showed almost everywhere, though there were a few people who managed to keep their head above the tide.

The public road which passed through the valley entered at the south, passed directly to the village, and then followed along the river-bank to a point near the hills. Here a bridge had been built, as the most available place, and, beyond, the road passed along the base of the Pyramids and so left the valley.

The village was nearly half a mile from the hills and the bridge, but one small house stood near both—in fact, was shaded by the trees that grew along the base of the Pyramids.

The house had been there for nearly a year, but never had a visitor crossed its threshold, except when young people went from motives of curiosity. The village people were poor, but they had enough natural pride to resent the presence of the hill people, and the smoke which curled above the tree-tops was very obnoxious to them.

The hill people were Gypsies. At least, so it was generally supposed, and they had never denied the supposition. There were plenty of things to encourage the belief. They had the black hair and eyes, the swarthy complexion, and other characteristics usually associated with the "wandering people," and the head of the family was a self-styled fortune-teller.

Her name was Hagar Lee, and with her were Leah, Nat and Kit—all said to be her children. They were not such citizens as the village people liked about them. Thus far they had been orderly enough, so far as was known; but as they were poor—unless appearances were deceptive—and did not work, how did they live?

The alleged fortune-telling of the old woman

brought in next to nothing; money was too scarce in the village to be thrown away.

One evening two men rapped at the door of the Lee shanty. A voice bade them enter, and they obeyed. Dame Lee was the only one of the family visible, but she was seated at ease, smoking a short, black pipe.

The three persons thus brought together formed a strong contrast.

Hagar Lee was evidently well past her sixtieth year, and if she had ever been agreeable to look upon, the day was long since past. She was greatly emaciated; nevertheless, the miserable rags which she wore covered a form which was still full of vigor, of almost masculine strength. Her features were irregular, her skin nearly as dark as an Indian's, and the coarse, gray hair which fell wildly around her face was no longer becoming; but her eyes were as black as ever, and they gleamed with unpleasant brilliancy.

Of the men, one was a muscular fellow, who carried his nature faithfully branded on his face. Such faces are to be seen in prison. Yet he had a good form, was not positively brutal of appearance, and there were those who thought Brian Markoe a fine-looking young man.

In strong contrast to his six feet of bone and muscle was the effeminate person of his companion. Clarence Webber looked out of place in the West, the land of muscle. Clarence was weak in many ways, and he might well have passed for one too weak-minded to be dangerous, had it not been for the conceited, treacherous, crafty look stamped on his face.

Truly, it was not a prepossessing appearing group thus gathered in Hagar Lee's shanty.

She motioned her visitors toward chairs, but Webber elevated his nose disdainfully and replied:

"We will not sit down. We merely came for a walk, and—to see why you sent for us. Let us know at once, for, to be frank, I am not pleased with your house."

"Nor my company, probably," Hagar coolly added. "Mr. Webber is fastidious; he takes more kindly to scenes like what Edwina Vane's wedding will be."

"The devil take her wedding!" Webber exclaimed, while Brian Markoe's face grew dark and angry. "What have we to do with that?"

"A good deal, since you are both disappointed suitors for her hand," coolly answered the Gypsy, still smoking.

"May the Old Nick seize you! How dare you say that? I wouldn't look at Edwina Vane!"

"Since when? Just now you are in love with Miss Floralice Heath. A month ago you loved Edwina madly, but Evan Conrad's fist beat it out of you. No, you don't love Edwina now, but you hate her and Evan. But Brian Markoe does love her and the approaching wedding does not please him."

"See here," the big man fiercely cried, "we have had enough of this. I won't have anybody making free with my name. Do you hear, woman?"

"Of course I hear, but that does not change the case. Men, you are fools!"

Webber started, and then stared blankly at the old Gypsy, a red flush on his usually pale face.

"See here, woman," he finally cried, "do you know who I am? How dare you address me thus?"

"Bah! do not think because you are Brigadier Baldy's step-son that I fear you—or him. But, come; I did not call you here to quarrel. I wish to benefit you. Make it worth my while and I will see that the marriage don't take place."

Both men looked at her sharply, but it was Markoe who answered:

"How can it be prevented?"

"Hum! Is the knowledge worth five dollars?"

"By Jawge! yes," Webber asserted. "I'll give it willingly. That Conrad struck me, and I'll give a V gladly to get square with him. Here's the money; but are you sure your plan will work?"

"If it don't, you shall have the money back." Webber tossed the bill into her lap.

"Tell us what to do," he said.

The Gypsy put the money carefully away, and then replied:

"Evan Conrad is about to do what no wise man should do—marry while he is as poor as a church mouse. Like every one else in Buck Basin, he lives on land owned by a landlord. He has never laid by a cent, and never will until his lease expires and he leaves the accursed place. He is bound body and soul to Sinclair Rhodes, and—"

"What has this to do with the marriage?" growled Markoe, impatiently.

"Everything. Two of Rhodes's agents are somewhere near—Knight and Pray. Suppose you notify them that Conrad has sold his recently-harvested crops, will deliver them secretly and then run away with all the proceeds, leaving the landlord to whistle for his money. Do you suppose the agents would stand idly by? No, they would descend upon Conrad, arrest him, and, my word for it, keep him in prison all winter. I think that would stop the wedding, and

you know Knight and Pray well enough to surmise whether they would be easy with him."

"By Jawge! that's the idea!" cried Webber.

"But will it work?" Markoe asked.

"Work! What's to hinder?"

"There are many chances of failure."

"Egad! you don't seem to know Knight and Pray. They are keen as hawks, and never let up on a man. Once let them mark Evan Conrad, and, as the old lady says, he will winter in prison. Buck Basin knows the style well."

Markoe was not so sanguine. He saw that the chances were, at least, evenly against them, and he had a more logical way of considering matters. Still, it seemed to be the only thing that held out any promise whatever, and Webber was so enthusiastic over it that he said no more in opposition.

He hated Evan Conrad bitterly, and was ready to embrace any scheme which would trouble him. He finally took up the thread of conversation and talked practically with Dame Lee, while Webber fell into deep thought and only aroused when Brian spoke of going. But Webber, instead, went close to the Gypsy.

"You seem to have a long head," he said slowly.

"What do you want of me now?" she asked, peering craftily into his face.

"You—a—spoke of Floralice Heath."

"Yes."

"Do you sell love-powders, or cast charms, or anything of that sort?"

Hagar laughed sharply.

"The course of true love never did run smooth," she quoted. "Now, here is the finest gentleman in Buck Basin at his wits' end for a woman! He has turned from Edwina to Floralice, but still is unhappy. Why?"

"By Jawge! she don't care a pin for me!" Webber bluntly acknowledged. "Conrad's friend, that accursed Hendrickson, is paying attention to her, and she has eyes only for him. Hendrickson, indeed! A fine fellow for one like her to look at. He keeps company with that shocking ruffian who calls himself 'Game Chicken, the Reformed Pugilist.' Ugh! the mere thought of it makes me shiver!"

And Clarence did force a contortion into his slender form, as though to prove his assertion:

Dame Lee looked at him in silence, but very sharply, for several seconds before she answered.

"So you would like my help with Floralice?" she finally said.

"By Jawge! yes—if you can help me."

"She would make a good mistress of your home, and it would please Brigadier Baldy. He likes her."

"Aw, yes, but he don't want her in the family."

"Why not?"

"The ridiculous old feller don't—ah—think I am worthy of her, by Jawge!"

The faintest possible smile flitted over the Gypsy's face, but in a moment she was calm and stoical as before.

"Beyond a doubt I can help you in this," she slowly said; "but I must have time. Give me a week in which to form my plans."

"Done! I'll come again then, and if you can help me, my good woman, I will pay you well. I just adore that charming Floralice, and I want to win her awfully. Put your wits to work, and I'll pay you for your trouble."

And then Webber and Markoe took their leave.

They had barely gone when an inner door of the room opened and a black-haired, swarthy-faced woman came out—Leah Lee.

"You have heard, my dear daughter," said Dame Hagar, nodding her head. "The young men were very kind."

"The fools are in the trap," said Leah, scornfully. "I knew it would work well. It is as easy to snare a man as to catch a tame fish. Yes, I heard all; I heard them agree readily to your subtle suggestion; and now we have only to press on and carry ruin and desolation to those we hate!"

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD BRIGADIER.

EVERY large place has more or less great men, and no place is so small that it cannot boast at least one man who is great in the estimation of his fellow-citizens. Even Buck Basin, bowed down and struggling with poverty, was no exception to the rule.

Brigadier Baldy was her great man.

His real name was Adam Benmarsh, but half of Buck Basin was ignorant of the fact. "Brigadier Baldy," or the "Old Brigadier," they called him, and they were titles of honor, respect and love.

He had been a soldier in the stormy days of the war for the Union, and though no one pretended to know whether he left the army as a general, captain or private, he reached their ideal of a true soldier. And yet he was neither boisterous nor stern, but an erect, military-looking, gentle and kindly old man, who was the idol of old and young alike.

This was the great man of Buck Basin, but he never suspected the fact. He held no office, and was almost as poor as the average of the citizens.

In the Battle of the Wilderness he had received a wound in the hip, and never recovered from it. The bullet had not been extracted, and it had partially disabled him ever after, though neither his movements nor outward looks indicated it.

Because of this he still drew a pension which, with his other efforts and means, enabled him to live, though he never had a cent to throw away.

In what way could this man, old, humble, gentle and poor, be the great man of the town? He was its oracle, adviser, friend and, as may be said, the father of all. Feeble women, strong men, troubled lovers and grieved children alike brought their cases to him, confident that he would sympathize with them, and give them the best of advice.

Such was Brigadier Baldy.

The greatest cloud on his life was his domestic relations. He had not married wisely. How he could have made such a choice was a mystery. Mrs. Benmarsh had been a widow with one child when he met her. The child had since grown to be the Clarence Webber already introduced here, while the ex-widow was noted as the possessor of a low, mean, trouble-making, vindictive disposition, and was universally disliked, to use a mild term.

Early one evening shortly after the scenes before described, Brigadier Baldy was seated alone in his house, in a room adjoining the kitchen.

He had eaten supper, but the table still waited—waited for his good-for-nothing nephew, Clarence Webber. The young man had not appeared in time for the meal, but this was not strange. He spent his time lounging about the village, and was hard to locate.

Brigadier Baldy would have been a rugged man at sixty-three years had it not been for the disabling wound before mentioned, and he looked rugged as it was. He had once been very muscular, and his shoulders were broad and heavy, and his arms large and strong even in his old age. He was as erect as ever, and as he invariably wore a long coat, there was always a suggestion of the soldier in appearance, as well as in his carriage.

His face, which was always kept fully shaven, was broad and full-colored, and no less destitute of hirsute growth than the top of his head. It was from this baldness he took his *sobriquet* partially, his supply of hair being limited to a thick, gray fringe around the sides and back of his head.

Such was Brigadier Baldy, the great man and idol of the town.

As he sat alone, quietly smoking, Clarence Webber entered the dining-room. He was affectionately greeted by Mrs. Benmarsh, who, virago that she was, loved her vicious son deeply; but Clarence's manner soon brought a look of disgust to the Brigadier's face.

The door was slightly ajar, making every word audible, and it needed but a few moments to reveal the fact that Clarence had been drinking to excess.

He took a seat at the table, and his loving parent hovered over him, making sure that all the delicacies of the board were brought to his notice—an attention which he received with supreme indifference.

Mrs. Benmarsh, however, had something on her mind which troubled her greatly, and she soon approached the subject.

"Have you been invited to the wedding yet, Clarence?"

"What wedding?" growled the young ruffian.

"Why, Edwina and Evan Conrad's!"

"Naw, I haven't."

"You haven't! Now, it's a burning shame—"

"Oh! don't you worry," Clarence interrupted, "for I am just as well off as those who are invited. The wedding is going to end in smoke."

"What do you mean?"

"There won't be a wedding."

"No wedding?"

"That's what I said."

"Why, it's to take place this very evening."

"They think it is," Clarence replied, with a chuckle, "but they will get confoundedly left. Do you suppose I would sit idle and let them walk into their Eden? Maybe you have forgot that Evan Conrad struck me in the face. I haven't, and that blow will cost him dear. The wedding won't take place."

"But what is to prevent it?" Mrs. Benmarsh more seriously asked, for she knew that her loved offspring was under the influence of liquor, and feared that he contemplated some crime.

Clarence usually disdained to confide in his mother, but the liquor and anticipated revenge made him communicative, and he laid down his knife and fork and faced with her a gloating smile.

"I'll tell you just what is to prevent it. What is Evan Conrad's business position? He has a long lease of the land he cultivates, and can't leave it until the lease runs out, without forfeiting a large sum which he deposited as a guarantee to his landlord that he would stay his term out. What has been the result of his labor on the land so far? Has he made a dollar? No; he is as poor as a church mouse to-day, and

always will be as long as he has Sinclair Rhodes as a landlord.

"Nevertheless, Conrad proposes to marry, and Edwina is willing to share his poverty. So far, good; what comes next is better. It has reached the ears of Shaffer Knight, one of Rhodes's agents, that Conrad is breaking the terms of his contract and swindling the landlord. What is the result? I'll tell you. The evening train will bring Knight to Oaktree, and from there he will take a train for Buck Basin. He will probably arrive one hour before the time set for the wedding.

"The wedding will not take place. Why? Because before the appointed time Conrad will be arrested for swindling, and you can safely bet that Knight won't let the ceremony go on. With a family on his hands Evan Conrad would be even less able to make a living, and, besides, Knight is noted for never letting up when he gets a grip on a man.

"To-morrow Edwina will still be Miss Vane, and Conrad will be on his way to jail. You can bet he will not get out this winter, and the chances are that he will serve five years, or such a trifle, in prison before he gets a chance to marry again."

Clarence ended with a chuckle, while in the next room Brigadier Baldy sat like one turned to stone. This revelation touched his very heart. There was nothing attractive or tender in his own household, but of all the young people of Buck Basin he liked Edwina Vane best.

He was one of the invited guests, if the profligate Clarence was not, and the discovery that the ceremony was likely to be interrupted startled him.

Not so Mrs. Benmarsh. She hated Evan Conrad because he had struck her son, and as Clarence finished she spitefully observed:

"It will serve him just right."

"I fancy it will."

"But how did you learn of Knight's intention?"

"Ha! ha! That's where the joke comes in. The whole affair is my little scheme to repay Conrad for that blow. Knight would never have known of the marriage, or, that is, would not have come at all only for me. The cooing lovers will have me to thank for their set-back, though, of course, the matter must be kept quiet. My hand must not show in the game."

"Well, I'm glad you're going to get square with that brutal Conrad!" Mrs. Benmarsh declared.

But Brigadier Baldy sat bolt upright and looked out into the darkness. He had heard news that troubled him sorely. Edwina and her chosen husband were happy, but their hopes were about to be dashed to the ground. Shaffer Knight was on his way to interrupt the wedding—to seize upon Evan Conrad.

And the Old Brigadier felt sure that the young man had not intentionally violated any law.

But this would make little difference to Knight. He and his partner, Pray, acting as agents for Rhodes, were a law in themselves, and when they accused a person he was usually a long time in getting his liberty again, and Conrad had no money to waste on a long legal battle.

It was time for the "Old Brigadier" to think of going to the wedding, but he did not think of it; all his thoughts were devoted to another subject—how could he prevent Shaffer Knight from interrupting the wedding.

To remonstrate with Clarence Webber would be a waste of time; he and his vicious step-son had long since tacitly agreed to be only passing acquaintances, and he knew the folly of trying to arouse a generous impulse in his dwarfed mind. Besides, it was then too late.

"But Shaffer Knight?" thought the Brigadier; "is he wholly devoid of pity? Is he sure of his evidence? Will he refuse to give Evan a chance before arresting him? Evan has been a good tenant, and his land is the best cultivated of any in Buck Basin. Is Knight so blind to this fact, so deaf to pity, that he cannot be moved?"

It was a momentous question with the old soldier, for he loved the young people devotedly, and he suddenly arose.

He had come to a determination. He would intercept Knight on his way to the village, and beg him to be merciful. If the agent had any heart at all he would try to touch it, and he felt that he could be eloquent in such a cause.

Let that be as it might, he would do his utmost to save his young friends.

CHAPTER IV.

AN APPEAL FOR MERCY.

HAVING arrived at a conclusion, the Brigadier at once left the house. The lack of sympathy between him and the other members of his family had long since broken any system of confidence, and on the present occasion he went as usual, without a word to them.

In the hall he secured his stout cane, and then walked quickly along the street. The small village was soon passed, but he continued his way, anxious to see Shaffer Knight alone and at a point where he could talk with him freely.

The night was dark and cloudy, and as he walked on he frequently paused to listen to the sound of wheels which would herald Knight's

approach, relying more on this than on his eyesight.

But no sound was to be heard, and he continued his journey until the bridge over Arrow river was reached. There he paused. It was the only way to approach the village, and seemed the best of all places to await the agent's coming—there was no missing him there.

For awhile the Brigadier stood erect, but finally sat down on the small timber which rested on the ends of the planks forming the bridge, and was the only parapet. The water was twenty feet below, dark, sluggish and deep.

Then began a period of waiting, the duration of which he had no means of computing or telling. He had walked rapidly, for, despite his troublesome wound, he was still active for one of his years, but it certainly seemed time for Knight to arrive, if he came on the train and hired a team at Oaktree. But the minutes wore away, and he did not come.

At the end of half an hour Brigadier Baldy began to grow hopeful. Perhaps there really was no danger. He knew young Webber had been drinking heavily; what he had said might have been a drunken man's vain talk. At any rate, a little more delay would make Edwina a wife, and Shaffer Knight would be too late in one respect.

But the hope was premature.

The sound of footsteps became audible, and the form of a man appeared in the darkness. He stepped upon the bridge, and Brigadier Baldy recognized the dreaded agent. He had come on foot, but this argued nothing advantageous.

The critical moment was at hand, and the watcher arose and stood in Knight's path.

The latter slackened his speed and looked sharply, evidently fearful that he had encountered a robber, or some one of that description, but the idea quickly vanished.

"Ha! is it you, Benmarsh?" he said.

"Yes, it's me," simply replied the Old Brigadier. "I've been waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? Why?"

"I wanted to talk with you."

"Then you'll have to hurry. I am on my way to the village, and in haste."

"I have heard why you are going."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; it is to arrest Evan Conrad."

"I did not suspect that the fact was known by people in general, but you have hit the nail on the head. I am going for that purpose, and am in great haste. The horse which I hired at the depot fell dead lame by the way, and I had to abandon him. Walking is not a rapid means of locomotion, and I am behind time."

As he spoke the last words he made a movement to pass, but the Brigadier put out his hand.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Knight; I want to talk with you."

"I will see you to-morrow."

"That will be too late; it is to-night or never. Sir, what is there against Evan Conrad?"

"Everything. He has broken every stipulation of his lease, secretly sold portions of his crops—but why enumerate? He has done enough to send him to prison for a term of years, and he is going there."

"Have you positive proof?"

"Yes."

"May I ask who are your witnesses?"

"You may not," Knight suspiciously answered. "You are his neighbor—probably his friend—and I cannot give you my case."

"Mr. Knight, do you know what is about to transpire at his house?" the Brigadier gravely asked.

"I know that if I don't make haste he will marry a girl as much a beggar as himself, and greatly complicate the case."

"Suppose that this was your wedding night, sir. Would you like to have some one enter and arrest you?"

"I suppose that if I had laid myself liable to arrest, my accuser would not consult my wishes."

"But I asked you to look at it from the standpoint of the bridegroom-elect," mildly replied the Brigadier.

"I don't care to suppose cases."

"But, Mr. Knight, Evan Conrad and Miss Vane are my friends, and I am sorely troubled at thought of the sorrow about to come to them."

"What is this to me?"

"I trust that you are not indifferent to others' troubles, sir."

"In business, I know only business. Come, Benmarsh, let me pass!"

The agent spoke impatiently; valuable time was going to waste, and he might be too late. But as he tried to pass, Brigadier Baldy again blocked his path. The old soldier was very much in earnest, but his manner was respectful, even pleading and humble.

"Mr. Knight, I beg that you will hear me. I have come all this distance to see you alone, and beg that you will have mercy on my young friends at the village. I have known Edwina Vane for years, and a more gentle and lovable girl I never knew. She is deserving of all good fortune, but what is in store for her? Sir,

it will kill her if Evan Conrad goes to prison. She is deeply attached to him, and the blow would fall heavily."

"Conrad should have thought of that. It's not my lookout," Knight curtly replied.

"Are you sure he has done wrong?"

"Of course I am."

"Who are your witnesses, sir?"

"I refuse to tell. Confound it, man, have you come here to pump me?"

"I have not. I am simply come to ask you to be merciful. As for your witnesses, I have reason to believe that you would not have suspected anything wrong had it not been for parties right here in Buck Basin, and that their motive in arousing you was simply out of revenge on Evan Conrad."

Knight looked more sharply at the Old Brigadier.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because I have heard such a confession made. Mr. Knight, you have been deceived."

"By whom?"

"Your Buck Basin informant."

"Who is he?"

"That I can't tell."

"Why can't you? But, pshaw! this is empty talk, and I am wasting time. You are making all this delay merely to give your loved, but criminal, friends a chance. Stand out of the way, old man; I will dally with you no longer."

"One moment, Mr. Knight," implored Brigadier Baldy, his voice trembling. "What I ask of you does not in any way interfere with the working of justice. I only ask that you give Conrad a fair chance and make sure of his guilt before you have him arrested. You will break Edwina Vane's heart if you go there to-night and break in upon them."

"Nonsense! Hearts don't break so easily in this generation. I've heard others talk like you. Every time I make a move to protect my employer from robbery the farce is repeated. Just because Sinclair Rhodes owns the land hereabouts, but does not live here, there is always a great hue-and-cry; it is an outrage when I try to protect his rights."

"Mr. Knight," said the Brigadier, with simple dignity, "I certainly do not ask you to neglect his rights. He should have justice done him. It is just that he should have what belongs to him, and the same rule will apply to his tenants. I only ask you to wait until you are sure Evan Conrad has done wrong before you strike at him. I ask no more, but this much I implore you to grant. For the sake of the young girl who will bear the burden of this blow, I beseech you be merciful!"

Again the Old Brigadier's voice trembled, but he stood as erect as though on military duty.

Unconsciously he removed his hat, and the light breeze blew his gray hair about where the line ran around the base of his head.

There was deep pathos in his appeal, and a more tender-hearted man might have been moved by it; but not Shaffer Knight. He never allowed what he called "weak sentiment" to interfere with work marked out by him as necessary, and a sneer crossed his face.

"All this is very fine," he replied, "but when analyzed there isn't a particle of sense in it, and that's what is needed in this world—horse sense!"

"And mercy!"

"To robbers?"

"Mr. Knight—"

"Oh! rubbish, rubbish! Will you still keep harping on this subject? If so, shout to the winds; I will not hear you. Confound your thick head! I believe you have delayed me here merely with the motive of delaying me so the wedding could go on, but I've got time to get there. Out of the way, you old beggar!"

The Brigadier proceeded to obey. He had made his appeal and lost, and though his heart was heavy with sorrow, he had no more to say. Sadly he stepped aside, but as ill luck would have it, moved in the same direction that Knight did as the latter tried to pass.

Once more they came face to face, and fury seized upon the agent. He thought his way had been intentionally blocked, and he caught the Old Brigadier in a harsh grasp and flung him aside.

The old man did not save himself in the least; he fell heavily beside the timber on the side of the bridge; but the impetus of his own exertions caused Knight to pitch forward also.

His foot struck against the fallen man, and then, with a wild cry, he pitched headforemost over the bridge, down toward the dark, deep water.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHADOW OF A TRAGEDY.

BRIGADIER BALDY scrambled to his feet just as a splash below announced that Knight had struck the water, and he arose with anything but amiable feelings. The shock of his fall had been a severe one, the force of it coming on his injured hip, and as no man is all angel, he could not help feeling indignant that a strong young person had hurled an aged one so heavily upon the hard planks.

A moment later Knight's voice arose feebly, yet in accents of terror.

"Help! help!" he cried.

"Let him help himself!" muttered the Brigadier. "He was responsible for his fall; let him swim to the bank."

The pain in his hip was sharp in the extreme, and he sat down on the timber until it should abate.

Once more Knight called for help—a feeble, husky cry—and then all was still. Even then the Brigadier did not stir. The howl of a wolf sounded from the base of the Pyramids, a hundred yards or more away, and was the only audible sound, near or distant, to be heard.

Suddenly, however, Brigadier Baldy sprang to his feet. Alarm gave him agility. His pain was forgotten; his anger vanished. A terrible thought had occurred to him.

What if Shaffer Knight could not swim?

Not until then had the possibility occurred to him. He was himself a skillful swimmer, once a noted one; and with the pain shooting along the course of the old wound, it had not occurred to him that any one else was destitute of the power. But a good swimmer ought not to have cried for help in such a small stream as Arrow River, and he suddenly became conscious that Knight's cry had been full of terror.

For a moment the veteran almost staggered. Was there a man drowning, or already drowned, in the dark river? Had he left one of God's creatures to die unaided?

It was a terrible thought, and the fact that Shaffer Knight had been a hard-hearted man on a pitiless errand weighed no longer in his mind. He was as anxious to see him alive and well as though he had been the best of men; if ever any one was incapable of harboring vindictive feeling, it was the Old Brigadier.

Without the loss of another moment he ran across the bridge to the south side, scrambled down the bank sloping from the abutment, and stood on the river-bank.

Was the agent there?

Eagerly he peered all about, but without avail. He saw no one; he heard nothing.

Then he quickly flung off his more cumbersome garments and plunged into the water. He had made no computation of time, but it might not be too late to save the drowning man. He must be saved. The Old Brigadier felt that he could not exist under the haunting terror of having left a human being to drown.

He swam with the agility of younger years, and soon completely crossed and recrossed the surface where Knight was likely to be if afloat, but not a sign could he find of the man. He then dove and began a search for what had once been a man.

But still he was disappointed; the river flowed steadily on, telling no tales, and not a sign was to be found to indicate that any one save himself had ever been in its dark waters.

The searcher did not desist until thoroughly wearied out. Then he went to the bank, drew himself up, and reclined close to the water's edge. The night was not cold enough for his wet garments to trouble him, and he would not have thought of them anyway.

He could only think of Shaffer Knight. No longer did he entertain the possibility that the man had escaped death. He felt sure the agent had been drowned. No man who could swim would have cried for help as Knight had cried when he went into the water.

Clearly, he had not been able to swim, and had died in the dark stream while the Brigadier rested quietly above.

The veteran's mind was filled with horror, and the rustling of the leaves seemed to hiss: "Murderer! murderer!"

He was not to blame for the agent's fall from the bridge; not by the moving of a finger had he contributed to that result; but he *had* left him to drown. It was now no excuse to his own mind that, beset by that keen pain in his hip, he had totally overlooked the fact that Knight might not be a swimmer, nor did he consider the fact that the agent had brought his fate upon himself by his own hot temper and violence.

Brigadier Baldy was not the man to excuse himself. He had been a soldier, but war and peace were wholly different things, and to his simple mind it seemed as much his duty to rescue Knight as though the agent had been his dearest friend.

Was he not a human being, and was not human life sacred?

"I left him to drown!"

Hoarsely the Old Brigadier muttered the words, still gazing at the water. He felt that he stood branded a modern Cain, and it almost overwhelmed him.

Finally it occurred to him that he ought to alarm the village, but as he arose another thought came to him, and the loyalty of his nature became perceptible.

It was too late to do Shaffer Knight any good, but if he told his story at all he must tell it in full, and there would be a great hue and cry. He felt sure his story would not be believed, but that it would be said that he had intentionally murdered the man to save Evan Conrad from arrest.

On the other hand, though Sinclair Rhodes, the land-owner, had a second agent, the two employees had seldom been together and it was more than likely that Ebenezer Pray had not heard of the charges against Conrad.

There charges, the Brigadier believed, had been maliciously made to prevent the marriage of Conrad and Miss Vane. With the two irrevocably married, and Knight at rest in the river, was it not likely that the secret would be forever buried? The conspirators at Buck Basin would suppose their charges had been ignored, and people would never trouble themselves much to learn what had become of Shaffer Knight.

There seemed to be a score of reasons why the Brigadier should remain silent, and no good one why he should speak.

Not the least of the former reasons was the fact that he felt his story would not be believed. Every one, he thought, would believe he had purposely thrown the agent from the bridge; the very fact that he had met him at that point would seem to tell against him.

The old man recoiled at the thought. Above all things his simple mind desired the esteem of his neighbors. He had been a brave soldier, and even now took pride in the *sobriquet* by which he was known, but old age was upon him and he desired only peace and good will on earth.

He felt that he could not go to the village, tell his story, and have people stare at him as at a murderer.

"I can't help Shaffer Knight now," he thought, "and it will be better for all—far better—if I remain silent."

This decision reached he left the vicinity and returned home. Once he had hoped to see Edwina Vane married, but he could not have faced her after what had occurred.

"She is good and innocent," he thought, "and I—I—the stain of blood is on my hands."

He shivered as he spoke, for his was no fanciful speech. He really felt himself responsible for Shaffer Knight's death. If he had not stopped him on the bridge the man would not have fallen over; if he had not disregarded his cries for help he would not have drowned.

There was a good deal of Puritanical severity in this view of the case, for it remained a fact that if Knight had not yielded to hot passion and assaulted an old man he would not have needed help, but the poor old Brigadier felt himself a criminal and suffered severely.

On reaching the house he succeeded in gaining his own chamber unobserved, and had soon discarded his wet garments. Of all persons it was most necessary to keep Mrs. Benmarsh and Clarence Webber ignorant of the fact that he had been in the river, but owing to the want of domestic harmony, neither ever entered his private room and he really had little to fear.

Once more comfortably clad, he sat down and thought on the subject at length.

In one evening the placid calmness of his life had been turned to torment. From that moment his greatest enemy would be his own thoughts. He had remained idle while a man was drowning in the river—a man whom he might have saved by prompt effort.

The sound of a voice outside startled him. He expected to hear some one apply at the door and ask: "Where is Brigadier Baldy, the murderer?"

It was a long, wearisome night, and what little sleep he obtained was haunted by dreams too dreadful to be told here, even if they were to the point.

In the morning he was calmer. His view of the case was still what may be termed ultra-extreme, and he did not accept any excuse for himself, but, seeing the necessity of hiding what he knew, he prepared to wear a calm face—for Edwina's sake.

Her enemies would say he had committed the crime, and for her sake, for his devotion was well known. So he resolved to keep his dread secret bravely—for her sake!

After breakfast Evan Conrad came. The wedding had taken place without any disagreeable feature except that Edwina had felt grieved that the Brigadier had not been there. A messenger had been sent to the house, but Mrs. Benmarsh had curtly declared that her husband had locked himself in his room and would see no one.

She had intended to hurt him, but, for once, had done him a favor. He suddenly saw a way to plausibly account for his absence, and declared that he had been sick, but would not mar the happiness of the evening by revealing the fact.

His face seemed to bear witness to his words, and young Conrad accepted the explanation unhesitatingly.

The Old Brigadier, however, had gone one step further in his deceit. He who had always disdained a falsehood had told one now unflatteringly. He was groping in darkness, and his only consolation was that Edwina was happy.

But he—the mind of the Old Brigadier was a torment. The cry uttered by Shaffer Knight as he fell from the bridge seemed to still ring in his ears, and the light had gone out of his life.

CHAPTER VI.

A WARNING.

THERE was one hotel in the town of Buck Basin, but if the landlord had relied solely on this line of business there would have been none. Patronage was not good, and it was only by other ventures that Thomas Nason managed to make both ends meet financially.

When he started his hotel he looked about for a proper name. He wished to imply that man could there find perfect peace, rest and immunity from trouble. What name would imply it? While the carpenters and masons labored, he thought. By the time the last stroke of work was done, he had arrived at a conclusion. The only place in the world which was one of complete rest was the grave.

Having decided, he went to a painter, and when the hotel was formally opened a neat sign swung in front of it, bearing this inscription:

"THE PILGRIM'S GRAVE."

A committee of citizens waited upon him and represented the sign as obnoxious, but he was an obstinate man in his way—and the sign remained.

At the time of our story there were two or three regular boarders at the hotel, one of whom was a young man named Edgar Hendrickson. He had been with Mr. Nason nearly four months, and was highly esteemed, his great, very great virtue being that he always paid his bills promptly.

He had done no work since coming to town, and this also touched the landlord's heart. A man of means in Buck Basin was, indeed, a very wonderful person.

Nearly every one else there was working hard and living in poverty, while Hendrickson did nothing and had plenty of money. Mr. Nason envied two men, and envied them in this order: First, young Hendrickson; secondly, the President of the United States.

The day after the wedding the fortunate guest was sitting on the hotel piazza, in a position where he could catch the breeze which swept down from the Pyramids, while placidly smoking, when he was approached by a man of peculiar appearance.

He had about two hundred and twenty-five pounds of bone and flesh, and looked strong and hardy enough to be a gladiator. And he claimed to be one, in a certain way.

His name was supposed to be Ben Bluff, but he always referred to himself as "Game Chicken, the Tender-Hearted Pugilist." He claimed to have once been a shining light "in the ring," but, being too tender-hearted for the work, he had reformed.

The traditions of the profession were maintained in his appearance, however. He always wore a suit of flannel, the shirt being not unlike a prize-fighter's, while the lower garments reached only to his knees, being met there by long stockings. The latter were fiery-red of color, while pants and shirt were of grayish-blue.

His hair was always cropped close to his head, but a thin, yellow beard ornamented his broad, red face in places.

Mr. Ben Bluff was not a handsome man, but there were those who believed him good-hearted, overlooked his eccentricities and gave him the hand of friend-ship. Among this number was Hendrickson.

"Hallo, sport," said the Game Chicken, in a husky voice, which was his by adoption, rather than necessity. "Workin' ez hard ez ever, I see?"

"Side by side with you," Hendrickson replied.

"Do ye know, I sometimes wonder what ever sent ye to this forlorn place?"

"Do you?"

"Yas."

"What brought you here?"

"I come ter drown my sorrers in oblivyon. I had been onmercifully licked by the St. Joe Pet. Been out o' ther ring fur years, an' then jumped in ag'in, reckless-like, ter t'ar ther Missouri garland o' vict'ry from ther Pet's classic brow. I didn't get ther garland, but I did git soundly licked. He done me up in four rounds, till I looked like a beef-critter ready fur quarterin'. What could I do arter that but seek ther shades o' some lonely place an' lose sight o' ther world an' myself? That's why I come, but you—you was not a devoter o' ther Queensberry shrine."

"Hardly."

"Yet you come?"

"Appearances indicate that I did."

"But not *why* you did."

"No."

Hendrickson spoke quietly, flipping the ashes from his cigar with his little finger. It was the first time the Game Chicken had ever tried to "pump" him, and he did not expect that his pugilistic friend would gain anything by the attempt.

The latter looked disappointed, hesitated, and then slowly said:

"There is rumors afloat ter-day ez ter why you come here."

"Indeed! What does rumor say?"

"I'll tell ye. Buck Basin is a peculiar place."

Ev'ry foot o' land hyar is owned by one Sinclair Rhodes, ther Eastern magnate. Ther actooal inhabitants are his tenants, an' they are under his heel like so many worms. They are poorer than church mice, but he has 'em by cast-iron leases an' they can't well leave. They stay, but they hate ther man who holds them to the plow."

"And well they may," interrupted Hendrickson. "He is a tyrant, and it's well he don't come among them."

"Ha! Mebbe you ketch on."

"To what?"

"Ther suspicions o' ther people."

"What do you mean?"

"In a word, they think you are hyar ez his spy."

Hendrickson turned upon the pugilist in amazement, but his expression soon changed.

"You are joking," he said.

"No, I ain't."

"Then you're mistaken. I am sure the people have no such an idea. I have never met more friendly persons than those of Buck Basin."

"I reckon they was, yesterday, but thermometers will change. Fact is, pard, it waster put you on yer guard that I come hyar now. Somehow, ther people hev got an idee that you are hyar ez Rhodes's spy."

Hendrickson's forehead had contracted in a frown.

"This is very singular," he said. "Who says so?"

"It's common talk. I've heerd it sev'ral times."

And then Game Chicken gave several names. "This is unfortunate," the young man observed.

"Rayther, I should say, 'specially ez I heerd some o' them say that ef they *knew* you was sech a spy, they would lynch you mighty quick."

"Nonsense! The people of Buck Basin are not that sort."

"Ain't thar toughs hyar, same ez ev'rywhar else? W'ot o' sech men ez Sowders, Judge, Markoe an' Webber?—'specially Webber, who hates you 'cause Floralice Heath looks more kindly at you than at him."

"Webber! Now you touch a chord that gives music. I was wondering what could have put such vile rumors afloat; now I have the clew. Webber hates me, and the insignificant little wretch is just vicious enough to undermine my reputation."

"Just because Floralice Heath loves you, not him."

Again Hendrickson frowned.

"I wish you would not couple our names, Ben," he said, in a tone of vexation.

"It was only done fur business illustration. I beg yer pardon ef I offended, an' I b'lieve men don't like ter hev their sweethearts talked about."

Hendrickson did not answer, and after a pause Game Chicken continued:

"Thar may be chunks o' wisdom in yer guess about Webber. He's mean enough ter spread a false report, anyhow. But I've told yer, an' now I advise ye ter keep a sharp watch fur danger. Ef they take a notion ter lynch yer, Buck Basin will be a hot place. Even ther decent people won't back up a man s'posed ter be a spy o' Sinclair Rhodes."

"I shall 'back up' myself if anybody lays a hand on me!" retorted Hendrickson. "The decent people of the town are not going to proceed to extremities on mere suspicion, and if the roughs touch me, I shall give them their own medicine with a double dose."

"Bravo!" cried the ex-pugilist. "That's the sort o' talk I like ter hear, an' ef thar is a row I'll be 'round ter help ye. I was licked in my last nine prize-fights, but I reckon there *must* be a man in Buck Basin I kin wallop. Wal, I'm off; remember ther tip I hev gi'n ye, an' don't run yer head into trouble."

Hendrickson, left alone, sat staring at vacancy and allowed his cigar to go out.

He was annoyed at what he had heard. He had come to the Kansas town with a special object in view, and while trying to accomplish it had seen fit to move slowly and quietly, *feeling* his way, rather than rushing ahead recklessly.

Now came this disturbance, stirred up through the maliciousness of a personal enemy, and he might find himself suddenly so unpopular that it would be out of the question to even remain there.

"And my name is coupled with Floralice Heath's," he thought, still frowning. "Ben Bluff calls her my sweetheart, and I suppose everybody in the village is doing the same. It is natural; and yet—yet—what would they say if they knew the truth? What would *she* say?"

He looked like one in physical pain as he mentally asked the question, and then he suddenly arose and dashed his half-consumed cigar aside.

"Curse the luck!" he muttered; "I wish I had never come to Buck Basin. I haven't the nerve—the strong heart—necessary for detective work. I almost wish Floralice would discover the truth and shoot me."

He went into the hotel with quick, nervous

steps, and two men who were passing looked at each other significantly, darkly.

"He seen us, an' don't dar' face us," said one.

"Sure sign o' guilt," added the other.

"Reckon you're right."

"We'll fix him ter-night so that no spy will dare come 'round hyar ag'in."

"Right you be. O' course, you'll be on hand at eleven o'clock! It'll be a right jolly night, old man."

"Sart'in. Don't s'pose I'd miss ther fun o' seein' Mister Hendrickson dance with Judge Lynch, do ye? Not much. I want ter see how ther spy will face grim death, you know."

CHAPTER VII.

FLORALICE.

THE most beautiful woman in Buck Basin was Miss Floralice Heath. Everybody acknowledged the fact, and when other pretty girls yield such a point it is a settled matter that the queen of beauty must be a charming woman to look upon.

Miss Heath was all of that. Above the average hight of her sex, she had a form which would have driven an artist to enthusiasm, and her face was dazzling. In contour, color and expression it was perfect, yet no one could describe it clearly. Words failed them when the subject of Miss Heath's beauty ruled the hour.

She had been in Buck Basin several months, and was another of the few persons who had plenty of money; but, like them, she was not a regular dweller in the place. She had come, she said, to regain her health, and though she certainly looked healthy enough when she came, the pure air had added new roses to her cheeks.

She was well liked at Buck Basin—and feared. When she saw fit, no one could be more gentle and winning, but there was always a slight reserve in her manners, and those who ought to know said that she could be as imperious at times as though she owned all Buck Basin, or even the State of Kansas.

On the evening of the same day last referred to, Miss Heath sat in the parlor of the house where she had made her home since coming to the town. It was anything but a richly furnished place, but on this point, at least, she had never demurred; she calmly put up with Buck Basin's poverty, and said nothing.

Her companion on this occasion was not one a young lady of refined tastes seemed likely to choose. His name was Sawders, and though the son of one of the honest residents of the town, he was one of the most disreputable fellows in the place.

As a boy he had been very "wild," as a man he was a lazy, hard-drinking, good-for-nothing.

During the last year he had been away a good deal, returning at intervals, and this was one of his occasional visits home. He had never been known to address Floralice Heath, yet on this occasion he had come secretly to the house and been readily received by her.

When they were alone she abruptly asked:

"Is there news?"

"Can't say there is, yet."

"Will there never be?"

"Oh! I don't doubt my ability to succeed sooner or later, but such things ain't learned in a day."

"Nor a year, it seems."

"That's about the color of it."

"I am becoming discouraged," she exclaimed.

"Here I have been two years on the track, and the end seems as far off as ever."

"You didn't manage right when you had that convict chap in your grip. Good judgment then would have put you on the track, but what could he tell after you had tied a stone to his heels and sunk him in the river?"

Floralice shivered.

"Why do you speak of that again?" she asked.

"Only incidentally. Sam Sloan would tell the yarn fluently, but, poor old fellow, he's under six feet of earth now. That was a nerry thing you did, Miss Heath—few women could have taken a convict out of prison as you did that night."

Sowders leaned back in his chair and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, looked familiarly at his companion. He had a motive in saying all he did. Fate had made him the ally of this beautiful woman, but though he seemed to hold a dangerous secret over her head, he was afraid of her, and always afraid that he would be left in the lurch.

He now referred to the past in order to remind her that her secret was his, and that he would be much safer as a friend than as an enemy.

Floralice realized this, and a gleam came into her dark, brilliant eyes which boded no good to him. Their alliance was as repugnant to her as it was satisfactory to him, and she wished herself well rid of the fellow.

But she dared not even anger him—just then. If the future showed her a chance, Mr. Sowders might find that he had only a fragile hold.

"You have been searching since you left here last?" she questioned, in a cold, deliberate way.

"Daily."

"And without result?"

"So far, yes."

"I begin to think she will never be found."

"Don't be discouraged."

"How can I be otherwise?"

"There's nothing like grit. Faint hearts never win games. Now, I'm a bulldog for grit. When I set out to do a thing I do it. I've agreed to find her, and I am going to do it. Then for my reward."

He looked at Floralice in a peculiar way, and she shivered again.

"You shall have your money, of course."

Sowders smiled in a disagreeable way.

"We'll talk it over later," he answered.

Floralice unclosed her lips, but shut them again without speaking. If Sowders had been a close observer he would have seen a firmness in her expression which boded ill to any plans he might have, but he was seized with a desire to still further show his power, and he went on, confidently:

"Of course you can depend on me, and I shall tell no one here that you are playing a part. I am a true friend, and though some men might take advantage of their knowledge and betray your secret, I am mum as long as we are friends!"

"Pray, what is my secret?" the girl coldly, coolly asked.

"Why, you—you—"

"I am looking for a certain woman. What more could you tell about me?"

"Egad! I reckon I could tell that you once liberated a convict from prison, and then chucked him in the river to drown like a superfluous cat. This might not affect some people, but Mr. Hendrickson would perhaps feel ill at ease."

Floralice Heath looked persistently at the floor. She dared not look at Sowders. She was no longer frightened, and it was the fact that she knew there was a defiant, threatening sparkle in her eyes that she would not look up. Her ally had become dangerous. He thought because he knew certain secrets that he could abuse his power. Previously he had been quiet enough; on this occasion he had just the same as announced that he should demand her hand as the reward of his service.

She read it in his voice, manner, and eyes, if it was not put in words.

Finally she looked up.

"You are talking nonsense," she said, quietly. "The people of Buck Basin have nothing to do with my affairs."

"Hendrickson is making love to you."

"If so, that is his business."

"And you are either reciprocating, or else you are playing a part with him."

"You have said quite enough," she answered, in the same quiet manner. "I do not thank you for meddling with what don't concern you, and if you don't learn to attend more to your affairs and less to mine, you can leave my service as soon as you see fit."

For once Sowders's usually prompt tongue had no reply ready. This steady defiance disconcerted him. He felt that it was not bravado, and her indifference was surprising. How could any woman with such a crime hanging over her head, talk so boldly?

He sat staring at her blankly, and then the silence was broken by a voice in the hall:

"Walk right in, Mr. Hendrickson. Miss Heath is in the parlor, and alone. Go right in!"

Floralice sprang to her feet. It was the landlady's voice, and she was about to usher in just the man of all men who was not wanted then. The girl had particular reasons for not wishing Hendrickson to see Sowders.

She looked at her visitor and then pointed to the large open window.

"Go!" she exclaimed. "Go at once!"

He hesitated a moment, half inclined to stay and punish her for her late defiance by arousing the other man's suspicions and jealousy, but as this would be so at variance with the long-standing scheme for winning her, he thought better of it and agilely obeyed.

She closed the window after him and lowered the curtain just as a knock sounded at the door.

She said "Come in" and then the door opened and Hendrickson appeared.

Brief as was the time given her to prepare, she had never seemed calmer and more at ease. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from the haste with which she had rid herself of her former visitor, but this only added to her beauty as she smilingly advanced to receive him.

There was one person who did not smile. Tom Sowders had gone no further than the window, but, pausing there, he utilized a small space at the side of the curtain and watched with a scowl on his face.

"Oh! yes, Mister Chickenson is very welcome!" he growled, with fine sarcasm. "She don't receive *me* that way. 'He is the favored one in all the king's dominion.' Turtle-doves over again, eh? Well, let them coo if they wish; I hold the winning cards in the game, and I will make them wish they were dead. He don't suspect that his fine lady-love is a murderess—poor blind fool that he is!—but I know all about that little affair, and I will win Floralice or send her to the hangman!"

"What are you mutterin' about, Tom?"

Sowders wheeled quickly as the words sounded at his elbow, and then laughed shortly.

"So it's you, Jake Judge?"

"Judge Lynch, you mean."

"Judge Thunder! What nonsense are you talking?"

"None er tall. There's heaps o' hoss-sense in what I am a-sayin', an' I'll prove it ef you'll come with me. Judge Lynch is up ter-night, an' there's goin' ter be one spy ther less afore mornin'. We're after a chap named Hendrickson, an' ef you want ter j'ine ther revelry, just say so an' chip in ter help pull ther rope."

CHAPTER VIII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

TOM SOWDERS was mistaken when he inferred that Hendrickson knew less about Floralice Heath than himself. The detective had not forgotten that singular scene near the prison when the convict was liberated, nor had he forgotten his own toilsome efforts to locate the parties to it.

When he found Floralice in Buck Basin he had advanced but little in his work. She was found, but the convict had disappeared. He was no nearer the explanation of the mystery than ever; he had no idea why the convict had been so strangely taken from prison.

He might have arrested her at once, but this was far from being to his purpose. There was no clew to the past of the convict. If the arrested woman saw fit to remain silent, he might utterly fail to make any case against her.

Knowing this he settled down in the Kansas town, determined to make her acquaintance, win her confidence, learn her past, and thus draw her into a web.

As time went on he saw that he had undertaken no easy task. He had apparently won her respect, but all his subtle efforts to gather information regarding the past proved unavailing. She had nothing to say on this subject. She avoided speaking of it with rare tact, but, knowing what he did, the evasion was transparent.

He knew she had a secret to conceal and she concealed it with wonderful skill.

Another obstacle soon stood in his way. He had thought that he could hunt down this imperious woman without compunction. On making her acquaintance he learned the other side of her character. She could be imperious, but this seldom happened. No one could be more gentle and agreeable than she was in her daily life.

Every day was a revelation to him, and he found himself forgetting that he was a detective on the track of a criminal. When with her he forgot all save—Floralice. And while the days went past in which he was to cast the web, he found a web weaving about himself and constantly contracting.

Had it not been for that scene near the prison he might have summed up his opinion of Floralice in words like these:

"She is a marvel of beauty, intelligence, graciousness and lovable ways. She can be imperious and is one to defend her rights bravely, but to her friends she is kind and loving. Her heart is a mine, rich in womanly graces and goodness."

But he remembered the meek, wretched convict, and the woman who menaced him with a revolver, and seemed destitute of one good emotion, and he shivered and wondered to what he was drifting.

For he could not blind himself to the fact that instead of being the insnarer, he was ensnared. He had come to regard Floralice as he had never regarded any other woman.

Had there been no dark chapter in the past, he would have laid his hand and heart before her and asked for her own in return. And he was a detective, seeking a criminal!

Life is full of strange complications, but it seemed to Edgar Hendrickson that there had never been one equal to that.

He was more deeply in the web than ever when he came out of the house that night, and he walked away like one in a dream. Detective or not, he was tempted to take Floralice, defy the shadows of the past, throw his official allegiance to the winds, and ask only an earthly lifetime with her.

And yet—yet—

He started, uttered an impatient exclamation and tried to forget her and everything else.

A footstep sounded behind him.

He did not heed it. Buck Basin had been a law-abiding place, and he had forgotten Game Chicken's warning.

He did not even turn, but the chance was soon lost to him. A man had stepped as softly as possible from the shadow of a building, and in his hand he held a missile made by filling a bag with sand—an effective, noiseless means of disposing of an enemy.

His hand went up—came down. The bag fell full upon Hendrickson's head.

It was a blow which would have felled a giant, and the stricken man went down in a heap. He was conscious that something wrong had occurred, but, almost insensible, made no movement whatever to rise or defend himself.

Other men whisked out of their hiding-places,

and Hendrickson was quickly raised and borne away between two houses, toward the rear. Here a horse was waiting, but their first movement was to bind and gag the prisoner.

They were still in the village, and though no outsider was visible, an outcry might prove fatal to their plans, and themselves.

This possibility guarded against, they flung their victim across the horse and hastened to leave the village. Everything was in their favor, and as no one appeared to oppose their plans, the houses were soon left behind. Not yet did they pause, however; their faces were set toward the dark form of the Pyramids, and they went on as fast as the men could walk beside the horse.

Gradually the prisoner recovered his senses, and as he fully realized his situation he remembered Game Chicken's warning.

The latter had said a rumor was afloat that Hendrickson was a spy, and that threats had been made against him. Undoubtedly his enemies had moved in the matter.

He looked at them sharply. All were masked, and they were but five in number. It was a small gathering for such a party, and showed that it was no popular uprising. Hendrickson felt sure that it was to be attributed solely to personal enmity. The same men who had set afloat such vicious reports had now taken one step further and aimed at his life, as well as his reputation.

He tested his bonds; they were too firmly applied to be displaced by his own efforts. He must submit for the present, at least.

The procession went on in grim silence, passing the bridge over the Arrow River, and reaching the base of the hills. Here they found trees, the thing so dear to a lyncher's heart, and they halted and pulled the prisoner from the horse.

Under the spreading tree-tops all was very dark, and masks might have been dispensed with. But they were kept on, and one man tore the gag roughly from Edgar's mouth.

"Let the feller have a chance ter chin," he said. "Ev'ry man ought ter be allowed a fare-well speech afore he shuffles off ther mortal coil."

"Hear! hear! A speech!" called a second lyncher, with an attempt at facetiousness.

Hendrickson answered promptly, and with surprising coolness:

"Release my hands, and I'll make a speech."

"Not much! Do you think we are fools?"

"I really do. What in perdition do you mean by thus assaulting me?"

"We mean business. Don't you think, Mr. Spy, that you can grind Buck Basin under yer heel. We are onto your game, an' we'll show Sinclair Rhodes how we deal with his gang."

"What has that to do with me?"

"Enough so that you are in fur a waltz with a rope as partner. Don't you play ther inner-cent; it won't go down with us."

"You are talking nonsense. If you mean to intimate that I have any connection with Rhodes—"

"That's jest what we do mean. You're his spy."

"I am not. I don't believe you think so. If you do, you are mightily mistaken."

"We don't expect you to admit it."

"Of course you don't, for you know I am not guilty. In a word, this is all a put-up job. I have had word that such rumors were afloat. They are lies; mere concoctions of a man who hates me, and wants me out of the way. If that man is here now, let him step forward."

No one moved. There was a moment's silence, and then the spokesman added:

"You are going 'out o' the way' fast enough, anyhow. Judge Lynch is out on the range ter-night. No spy kin live in Buck Basin, and we are goin' ter fix you. Here is a rope and a tree. Connect them with you as a steady weight, and what will be the result? Spy, you have got ter hang!"

"Are you in earnest?"

"We sart'inly be."

"Let me suggest a compromise then. Men so free to cut and slay as you are must be brave men. Give me a fair chance. Release me, give me a revolver and go out on the prairie, and I'll fight the whole lot of you."

"Not by a blowed sight. Do you suppose we're goin' ter throw away a sure thing?"

"So you're afraid?"

"Talk's cheap, an' you can chin while we act. Men, git ready the rope, an' we'll wind this business up straightway."

"I give you fair warning that you'll get into trouble," said Hendrickson. "Friends of mine here will know just whom to place their hands upon to avenge my murder. I've talked this matter over with them, and we agreed as to who had started the lie about me. If you do me harm, you will find your crime recoiling on yourselves."

"Nonsense! This is all wind. Here, one of you guard ther pris'ner, an' ther rest on us will find ther right sort o' a limb. It won't be no easy job, it's so dark."

Leaving the guard, the others proceeded to carry out the last order. As the leader had said, it was difficult to find a good limb where the rope would hang properly. While looking,

they worked several feet away, but one of their number finally ascended a tree, and the matter was duly settled and the rope placed.

"Now for the prisoner!" said the leader.

Back they went, but—

"Whar be they?" asked the last speaker.

For a moment there was no answer, and then one of his followers suddenly said:

"Hyar's ther pris'ner on ther ground."

He bent over the prostrate man, and then suddenly sprung up.

"Boys," he cried, "this ain't the spy; it's Jake, an' he's stone dead. Great Scott! what has happened here?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUSKY GIRL OF THE PYRAMIDS.

THE men stood as though petrified for a moment, and then the leader sprang to the side of their fallen comrade.

"Dead! He ain't dead," he declared, "but he is knocked senseless. Whar's Hendrickson? What the blue blazes has happened hyar, anyhow?"

It was a question which none of them could answer, for the prisoner had certainly been left securely bound.

"He never got away alone," added the masked leader. "Scatter an' search. Somebody's helped him away, but they can't have gone fur. Hunt 'em down, an' kill ther hull durned lot you come upon. We're in fur ther swim, an' they'll make it hot fur us ef they git away. Go for them!"

The order was promptly obeyed.

It was clear that the fugitives must have taken to the rugged side of the Pyramids, so to that quarter the would-be lynchers turned their attention. They now had more than mere spite to urge them on. If Hendrickson escaped, they might find the noose shifted from his neck to theirs.

He must not escape, and so, to prevent it, away they went in headlong pursuit.

Hendrickson had been as much surprised as any one at his rescue, and how it happened he did not exactly know. He had been standing by "Jake" when the sound of a heavy blow was followed by the lyncher reeling back against him so heavily that he almost went down, too.

When he fully recovered his balance, Jake was on the ground, lying as still as the earth itself, but before he had time to withdraw his surprised gaze, a hand grasped his arm nervously.

"Not a word! Don't alarm those men."

It was a woman's voice, and as he partially turned something cold touched his wrists and his bonds fell away. Another moment and his feet were free, and then he saw his rescuer standing before him, still holding the knife which had done such good work.

She gave him no time to speak.

"Quick!" she exclaimed, "we must get away from here. Your life depends upon it. Now, carefully, carefully! Don't let a rattling stone betray your escape."

She had seized his hand and was leading him away, but he now aroused from his surprise and became as cool as ever. He had been rescued by a woman, and though he did not thus far know who she was, it was the time of all times to make good his escape.

Before them was the sloping side of the Pyramids, covered with rocks and underbrush, and in the darkness progress seemed to him almost impossible, but his guide, still holding his hand, found a way easily.

He began to have a suspicion as to her identity. He remembered the dusky people who lived at the base of the hills, and though they were seldom in the village, he had two or three times seen the youngest of the quartette—Leah.

A handsome girl she was, despite her swarthy face, but she paid the penalty of being one of the Gypsy family and none in Buck Basin was so poor as to be her friend in the eyes of the world.

They had placed several yards between themselves and the lynchers when the first alarm came, but it came emphatically when it did sound. Up the slope behind them rushed Hendrickson's enemies, and their headlong advance showed the fugitives that a slow, quiet retreat was no longer to be thought of.

"Have you a revolver?"

Hendrickson asked the question sharply, looking back at the men with flashing eyes.

"Yes."

"Give it to me, then."

"Do you mean to fight?"

"Fight? Yes; I'll shoot the man who tries to touch me. I am no mere wolf to be hunted—"

"Not yet. Come with me, and I will show you a place where they can't get at you. We are safe enough; we have two revolvers, and I defy them to take us!"

Her voice was as cool and steady as that of a man; and Hendrickson felt that he had secured no mean ally. She still clung to his hand and led him forward but the lynchers gained rapidly. She had given him a revolver, and he was impatient to use it.

These men had placed themselves in the list of mere assassins, and he did not like the idea of

fleeing from them when the odds were no more than four or five to one. He had often fought more difficult battles in his career as a detective.

He had been aware that they were getting dangerously close, and a shout suddenly arose. "Thar they be! Press on, men, an' we'll hev them in a shake. Shoot ther cusses!"

And a bullet whizzed past the fugitives. Hendrickson's eyes flashed and he drew back the hammer of his revolver, but still the girl urged him on.

"It's only a step, and when we get there we are safe," she said, never releasing his hand.

"But a chance bullet may hit us."

"Not much! Those fellows can't shoot in the dark, and I can. But here is the place I meant Spring up on that ledge!"

And she set the example by making an upward leap worthy of an acrobat. Hendrickson could do no more than to follow, and up he went. At first glance he realized why his companion had been so anxious to reach the place. It was almost like a house on a rock, or, to speak more correctly, the rocks above the ledge took the form of a tunnel, showing a vacant space like a cave beyond.

The entrance, where the guide now turned at bay, was very narrow, and as the lynchers must leap up on the ledge to get at them, it seemed as though they would be able to hold a large force at bay there.

Before he could form any definite plan he was surprised to see the girl bend down, and when she arose she held several stones of about the size of bricks in her hands.

The lynchers were still coming on, and one had just raised his voice in a hoarse shout when a stone went sailing through the air and his voice ceased with suspicious abruptness, only to arise a moment later in a volley of oaths.

Hendrickson's friend laughed shortly.

"Hit him, you see. If they want to assault this fort, let them come. We will give them the warmest welcome they ever had."

"My dear young lady, you are a trump card!" the detective declared. "Words would be thrown away in praising you, for they weaken when applied to heroism like yours. Hallo! here they come!"

The pursuers had advanced, and Hendrickson decided to give them warning before proceeding to extremities. He shouted, and succeeded in bringing them to a halt.

"Oh! you're there, be you?" cried a derisive voice.

"We are, and you'll find it out if you don't keep back. Now, just one word to you, men. The safest thing you can do is to get out of this at once. We are two determined men, armed to the teeth and ready for a fight. We will bear no more molestation. Keep away, or we will shoot to kill!"

"Two can play at that game."

"I don't care a cent what you do. If you want a fight, come right ahead. I merely give you fair warning, and now if you want to attack us, your blood be on your own heads. That's all."

"Don't you crow too loud. We'll hev ye yet."

The retort was bold enough, but they evidently did not care to be too precipitate. No advance in front was made, but a consultation among the men was followed by sounds which indicated that they were looking for a way to attack from the rear.

Hendrickson's friend smiled at this and assured him they were in absolutely no danger. The tunnel-like cavity was only a little recess in the rocks, and could only be reached by the way they had gained it.

The detective, however, gained an idea when he saw the members of the gang scatter. Not more than two, at the most, could be left in front. Why could they not make their escape at once?

The girl caught at the proposal immediately. "Perhaps it is best," she said; "and you can come to our cabin until they have given you up."

"I think you are Leah Lee."

"I am."

"Well, you've done me a favor, and I shall surely call some time, but there is hardly occasion for it to-night."

"But I want to talk with you."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"I'll tell you when we are at the cabin—it's no small matter."

Leah spoke more earnestly than usual, and as it occurred to Hendrickson that she might know something about the causes which had led to his trouble, he said he would go there at once if they could escape.

"It's my opinion that we are not going to get out of this without a skirmish," he added. "They have not sent all their force to the rear and left the front unguarded."

"Then let us go carefully," Leah quickly replied. "There is underbrush in the way, and loose stones, but I know every foot of the road."

Let me lead, and no noise shall be made to betray us."

"Go on, then. I will be ready to meet whoever opposes us, if we are unlucky enough to run upon anybody."

They descended from the rocky platform and began to retreat. Leah had made no empty boast when she declared that she knew the way well. She found paths where Hendrickson would never have suspected their existence, and they moved along through the bushes, and among frowning rocks, with satisfactory silence.

As they went on Hendrickson's hopes arose, and he was congratulating himself on a safe departure when they suddenly came face to face with a man between two walls of rock.

He paused in evident surprise, but before even the detective could move, Leah sprung forward like a tigress and presented a revolver at the unknown's head.

"Surrender!" she hissed. "Not a word of alarm, or you are a dead man!"

Her voice rung imperiously, but the man was plainly not of weak material. With a quick motion he threw up one hand and snatched the revolver away, and in a moment more had turned it upon her and pressed the trigger.

CHAPTER X.

LEAH SURPRISES HENDRICKSON.

HENDRICKSON uttered a cry and sprung forward, but not quickly enough to prevent the unknown's purpose. The hammer of the revolver fell. If the weapon had been true, nothing could have saved the girl's life, but it missed fire. Only a harmless "click" followed.

Another moment and it was wrested away by Edgar Hendrickson's strong hands.

The second man, however, proved himself possessed of great nerve and quickness of action, and he threw himself upon the detective in a headlong way. The latter found himself forced to a personal encounter, whether he would have one or not.

What he feared most was a cry that would alarm the other lynchers, and he took care to promptly prevent the possibility of this by closing his hand over the man's throat.

Another moment and they were engaged in a fierce struggle. Hendrickson was a powerful man, but he soon found that the unknown was equally so. An attempt to beat him down by mere strength failed, and he glided like a snake from every hold by which the detective tried to trip him.

Back and forth they whirled with a rapidity which baffled Leah's every movement to aid her ally. The Gypsy girl's will was good enough, and she had drawn a dagger from her pocket and eagerly watched for a chance to use it. The hot blood of her race was in her veins, and her nature knew no such thing as scruple. She would have stabbed the unknown in the back without remorse if she could.

Luckily for him the opportunity was not given. The detective's repeated efforts were successful, and he finally went down on top of his enemy with force sufficient to dash the breath from the latter's body for a time.

Just then a voice called some indistinguishable name not far away, and Hendrickson sprung to his feet.

"Lead on!" he said hurriedly to Leah. "We shall have the whole gang after us if we stay here. Lead on, at once!"

The Gypsy girl looked regretfully at the fallen man. All her evil passions were aroused, and she would gladly have used the dagger even then, but she was wise enough to know that Hendrickson would not countenance such an act.

Without a word she obeyed his directions.

Once more she chose the way with admirable skill, and without further molestation, they escaped from the vicinity.

Hendrickson would gladly have returned to the village, but he remembered his promise and did not demur as she led the way toward the Lee cabin. But they went almost in silence. He was thinking of his late adventure and wondering what would be the outcome. He believed he could name every one of his late assailants, but his inclination was to disregard the matter and take better care of himself in the future.

He would hasten to convince honest people in the village that he was in no way connected with Sinclair Rhodes, and if the ruffian element again molested him, he would try to give them a lasting lesson.

What Leah's thoughts were he did not know; indeed, he hardly thought of her until her sudden stop caused him to look up. The Lee cabin was before him.

Leah pushed open a door and, though all was dark inside, bade him enter.

He hesitated for a moment. Something seemed to warn him not to enter the building, and a more practical reason existed in the fact that if he had been asked to name the most reputable and dangerous men of Buck Basin, he would have said they were Nat and Kit Lee.

After all Leah had done for him he would not hesitate, however. He followed her, and the girl soon had a lamp lit. Hendrickson looked

curiously about while she secured the door and curtained the windows.

No one else was visible in the small, rudely-furnished room.

Leah turned to him, and, apologizing for their poor quarters, asked him to be seated, and it seemed that she had almost forgotten their late adventure. Her eyes gleamed brightly, and the smile on her face was thoroughly womanly.

That she was handsome, despite her dusky face, no one could deny, and her regular features, dark, brilliant eyes, and supple, well-rounded form made a picture which, somehow, reminded the detective of a panther.

Just now she was all graciousness, and no belle of civilization could have been more easy and polite as she saw that he had the best chair in the room. Somehow, though, Hendrickson felt ill at ease. She was too gracious, in his opinion, and too evidently pleased at having him for a guest.

If he had been a vain man he would have thought that Leah Lee was in love with him. Not being a vain man, he hoped she was not.

She sat down and brought the battery of her great, midnight eyes to bear upon him.

"You remember that I said I had something to tell you?" she abruptly began.

"Yes."

"I think I shall surprise you."

"Go on, and see."

"Also, I shall undoubtedly offend you, at first."

"I promise to forgive you."

"Then I will speak plainly. Whom do you lay the blame of your adventure to?"

"Personal enemies; I shall try to learn who. But I remember that you promised to surprise me. Have you a suspicion? If so, state it."

"I will, though you will be offended. In a word, the person who set the lynchers upon you was a woman. Her name—Floralice Heath!"

Hendrickson started, and his face was a panorama of conflicting emotions. He tried in vain to control it. He was not then a detective, but a lover. He heard Leah speak ill of a woman whom he—yes, he loved Floralice! Why try to deceive himself? He loved her; the anger in his heart as he heard her accused proved it. But he could not spring to his feet and defend her as a loyal lover should do. Remembering that scene by the prison walls, a year before, he could not feel that she was worthy of being loyally defended.

"You are making a singular charge," he said, uneasily.

"Why singular?"

"Why should a woman set lynchers at work?"

Leah smiled slightly.

"Did they tell you that they believed you to be an agent of Sinclair Rhodes?"

"Yes."

"Her work?"

"But why, I ask you, why should she do this?"

"The fair Miss Heath is not the amiable and spotless woman she seems. Her past life has been dark and devious, and she has much to conceal. If she was known to the world as she is, she would soon be dragged from the pedestal where she poses so daintily as a model woman. She fears you will thus drag her down."

"Nonsense!"

"What do you mean by that?"

Hendrickson hesitated. He could not tell her that his association with Floralice had been such that, whatever might be "dark and devious" in her past, he was sure she regarded him too highly to do him harm.

Leah, however, seemed to read his thoughts, and a peculiar, scornful smile flitted across her face. It vanished, and she quietly replied:

"Perhaps you think because she is so fascinating at times that he is incapable of doing wrong. Who can't be agreeable when she tries? Don't trust Floralice Heath."

"I have two questions to ask you."

"Go on!"

"First, how does it happen that you know so much about her?"

"That I can't explain. I am sorry, but I cannot tell a word. Don't blame me for this—it is impossible."

"Well, why does she fear me? Even if her life has not been blameless, why should she think that I would 'drag her down,' as you express it?"

"She thinks you are a detective!"

Hendrickson could not avoid a start. Since coming to Buck Basin he had tried in every way to prevent any one suspecting that he was a detective, and this blunt avowal disconcerted him for a moment. He was, however, not only capable of self-control as a rule, but possessed of a measure of quick wit, and as he saw that Leah was watching him closely, it occurred to him that perhaps this was the time when the suspicion would be confirmed or put to rest.

"What nonsense!" he exclaimed. "What has given rise to such an absurd idea?"

"A guilty conscience."

"So far your accusations have been vague. Can you prove that she is a criminal, or anything of the kind?"

"If you wish, yes."

"I do wish it."

The sudden drooping of Leah's eyelids did not wholly conceal the sparkle in her eyes.

"To do this you must take a journey."

"Whither?"

"That I can't tell; but if you will be guided by me I will convince you."

"How can I go if I don't know my destination?"

"I will go with you. Of course you will know where we are when we get there, but to tell you in advance would be to ruin all, perhaps. Place yourself under my guidance, and I will convince you that Floralice Heath is a dangerous woman to know."

Hendrickson did not answer at once. He sat looking keenly at the dark, handsome face before him. He was surprised that the swarthy girl of the Pyramids should know, or claim to know, anything about one so far above her in the social scale as Floralice Heath. Was she speaking the truth, or merely telling a falsehood—as a vicious woman will, sometimes, to harm one of her own sex.

She met his gaze unwaveringly, yet with an air of modesty and sincerity which impressed him strongly. And was it not his ruling passion to learn more of Floralice?

"I will place myself under your guidance," he finally said.

The die was cast, and, having promised to meet her the next evening prepared for a journey he left the house. He returned to the village in so thoughtful a mood that it was well none of the lynchings were about. He went safely, but in a confused and uncertain state of mind.

CHAPTER XI.

IN STRANGE QUARTERS.

FORTY-EIGHT hours have elapsed since the scene of our last chapter, and we are required to imagine ourselves at the outskirts of a city many miles from Buck Basin—the exact name of the place may here be left unmentioned.

There is less of far-stretching prairie than around the little Kansas town, and the environs are dotted with trees of all forms, from those that line the roads to the more pretentious ornaments of private grounds.

At one point a large building stands a hundred yards back from the road. Around it is an inclosed field of at least four acres, with almost a wilderness of trees and shrubbery, though kept in good form.

The building is of brick, and of very large size; too large for any private residence. It is also plainly built, but unusually strong, and a close inspection would show an observer that nearly all the windows were barred.

On the evening in question two persons paused before the iron gate which fronted the street, one of whom was a man, the other a woman. The latter rung the bell attached to the gate. It speedily brought a man from a little building at one side, but a few words from the woman caused her to be admitted with her companion almost in silence.

The visitors entered, the iron gate clanged to behind them, and they walked along the handsome drive-way which led to the main building.

"Before we go further," said the man, "I want to know just what sort of a place we are going to. Thus far I have followed blindly, but I should be too blind for common sense if I did not now ask for an explanation. The locked gate, the high wall connecting with it, and the gentleman of the key, all tell that we are on peculiar ground. This is not a State Prison—what is it?"

"What do you surmise?" she asked.

"It may be a lunatic asylum."

"You are right."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope you don't intend to shut me up?"

"Certainly not."

"Then why are we here?"

"To show you what Floralice Heath really is."

"How can that be done, when she is a hard day's journey distant?"

"I will show her to you here before the night ends."

He wheeled upon the speaker abruptly.

"Miss Lee, you are a peculiar person."

"In what way?"

"Either you are in league with Floralice Heath, or you have a remarkable knowledge of her coming and going."

"You forget that I am a Gypsy, and of a race of fortune-tellers. To those who can read the future, many things supposed to be hidden are open and clear."

"Does this gift give you the power to manipulate mad-house officials like jumping-jacks, or how do you propose to enter the place?" he asked, with nonchalance hardly to be expected.

"I have friends here who will help me. Of course it is the only way to enter, and secure the liberty we need. We are expected, and a keeper will let us inside the asylum as the first man did through the gate. Then I will soon show you why I have used such haste since leaving the depot."

"In other words, Floralice Heath is supposed to be on her way."

"Since you have surmised it, I will admit the fact. Now let us go on before more time is lost. You shall see that even prison doors can be unlocked by those who use the right means."

They went on along the well-kept walk. Edgar Hendrickson was on the alert, yet more than ever he had occasion to wonder and meditate. The sudden revelation of the Gypsy girl's power was unexpected. He had always looked with disdain upon the dusky people of the Pyramids; he would have laughed at the idea of their being more than ordinary strolling vagabonds.

But Leah—what was she that she could come and go so mysteriously?

He was not venturing into the building like one blindfolded. He had no great amount of faith in his swarthy guide. She might be trying to lure him into a trap; but he was prepared for what might come. Armed to the teeth, and with wits sharpened by several years' experience as a detective, he felt able to care for himself in almost any complication or danger that might arise, and he followed Leah boldly.

Passing the front of the building, she went unhesitatingly to a side door and pulled a bell-handle twice, but in a very gentle manner. Al- most before the last peal had ceased to sound, the door was opened, and a burly, rough-looking man stood before them.

Before Leah could speak, he stepped back quickly.

"Come in! Don't be seen waiting here."

They obeyed, and Hendrickson saw that they were in a small room which seemed devoted to the use of the man on guard. He looked somewhat nervous, and as he observed that he did not know as they would come, it had grown so late, the detective thought that he would have been glad if they had not come.

"Is all well?" Leah asked.

"Yes."

"Any news from the woman who is coming?"

"None, except that my wife overheard the doctor say that she was coming."

"Then, the sooner we get to our places, the better. Where is your wife?"

"Just went to the other room. She will return— Ah! here she comes."

The door opened and a little, pale-faced woman entered. She did not look like an asylum employee physically, but Hendrickson was at once struck with the peculiar appearance of her eyes. They were steel-gray, and had a peculiarly cold, unfeeling look. He felt that she had the heart, if not the strength of body, for work inside such a place.

Seeing Leah, she dispensed with all form of greeting, and abruptly said:

"You had better make haste. The other woman is liable to be here at any time, and the sooner you are in place, the better. The doctor is in his study now, but there is no knowing how soon he may be prowling about. I suppose you both understand that caution is necessary. You are admitted here against the rules of the place, and though with common care you are safe, you would be anything but that if the doctor was to discover you."

"You would be likely to occupy a cell the rest of your lives," dryly added the doorman.

"The secrets of private mad-houses must be kept secret."

"We understand all that," impatiently replied the Gypsy girl. "Lead on, at once!"

They went, and the woman with the cold, pale eyes conducted them through several rooms until they reached a small one which was scantily furnished and seemed to have no particular use.

The only light came from a transom over a second door, but the woman brushed aside a curtain and showed them that the room was partially connected with a larger one by means of huge windows fixed in the plain wall. When the curtain was up one light would have answered for both rooms, and they would have been practically one; with the curtain down they became separate.

Hendrickson at once saw that they would have an excellent chance to see and hear all that occurred in the larger room, and his faith in the venture increased somewhat.

"I have a word of caution to give you before I go," the woman said. "Whatever you see or hear, remain as quiet as the grave. Bring discovery upon yourselves and you may never see the outside world again."

And then she left them alone.

Leah shivered perceptibly.

"I shall be glad when it is over," she said. "The air of this place stifles me; I know it too well. Private mad-houses never have good reputations, and this is a living tomb and place of torture. The chief doctor is a sleek-looking, smooth-spoken man, but a very demon at heart, and his system of ruling the place is shocking."

Hendrickson did not answer; he was wondering if Leah would be so confidential if she knew he was really a detective.

"What would you think of a person who would imprison another, perfectly sane, here?" she continued.

"It would be severe, to say the least."

"Severe! Is that all you have to say?"

"One thing more. I, for one, would be re-

venged on the person who would shut me up thus."

It was a warning, for Hendrickson was by no means wholly at ease. He began to think that it was a mad idea to expect to see Floralice Heath there. Had he been decoyed by the Gypsy girl?

There seemed a strong possibility that such was the case, but his hand rested on his ready revolver and he was determined to make matters very warm for whoever should molest him. Leah, at least, could not escape the consequences of any treachery unless she was far better provided with means than seemed probable.

She had been keeping the curtain drawn somewhat back, so as to give a view of the next room, but she suddenly allowed it to fall again.

"Now look with all your eyes," she said, "but be careful how you do it. The show begins!"

Her words grated on Hendrickson's ears, and with good cause. Making barely room enough for observation he had been looking greedily, and as Floralice Heath walked into the larger room he experienced a peculiar thrill.

Yes, it was she; there could be no doubt about it. No one that he had ever seen had those peculiar attractions in so strong a degree, and she seemed to shed light upon the somber, crime-haunted old asylum. It was like a gleam of sunshine in a place of darkness, but so incongruous that he felt like rushing forward and beseeching her to leave at once.

But no; she was there of her own free will and he must see the game to the end.

He noticed that her face did not bear its usual calm, dignified expression. There was a hard, tense look about her mouth which made her look older, sterner, and he was led to vividly remember the scene by the walls of the prison, the convict and his imperious foe.

Miss Heath had taken a chair, but her gaze was fixed on the door, and as it again opened Hendrickson looked eagerly to see who was coming. What new revelation was at hand?

CHAPTER XII.

THE ASYLUM PRISONER.

A MAN entered the other room and Hendrickson looked at him eagerly. He was one to attract attention, but in his present condition, not one to admiration. He seemed to be of middle age, and had a large, well-rounded, athletic figure, but it was covered with most wretched rags. Clearly they had long done service, but that they would last much longer seemed impossible.

A thick brown beard covered the lower part of his face, and this, like his long hair, was in disorder and matted to a surprising degree.

A wretched-looking object he was, and his face had a hopeless expression like that of one who has given up the last grain of confidence in life.

The door was closed behind him by unseen hands, and then he stood alone in Floralice's presence. She arose and they looked steadily at each other, but his face gave no sign to indicate whether he recognized her.

Floralice seemed to hesitate about speaking, but as the silence grew oppressive she aid, almost hurriedly:

"I have come again, Byron Brooks."

The man in rags bowed humbly.

"I hope you are well," he said, in a low, hoarse voice.

"What do you care whether I am or not?"

"I want everybody to be well."

It was a dull, stupid reply, and the man, looking at the floor only, seemed to possess no more intelligence than an ox.

"Are you tiring of your imprisonment here?" abruptly demanded the visitor.

"I am quite content."

"Nonsense!"

"I am well used," he repeated.

Floralice made an impatient gesture.

"Drop such forms of speech. I understand that it means nothing except that you have been drilled by the keepers of this place. Such absurd statements may gain you favor with the doctor when ordinary visitors are here, but you need use no mask when talking with me. You know me, don't you, Brooks?"

"I think 'twas you who put me here," he answered, still looking at the floor, still apathetic.

"Well, are you not tired of the place? Would you not like to leave, to go out into the world again as a free man?"

"No, I am contented here."

His ox-like answer seemed to anger the visitor. She made another impatient gesture; such stupidity stood like a rock in the way of the object that brought her there.

"Remember Eulalie!" she said.

The man started, raised his eyes and sighed.

"Eulalie!" he whispered, as though addressing only himself. "Eulalie! I have heard the name before."

The attentive watchers in the next room could not see Floralice's face, but after a moment of silence she spoke in a doubtful voice:

"Are you playing a part, or is your mind giving way under the horrors of this place?"

He raised one hand and brushed it slowly across his forehead, pushing back the matted

hair. Then he glanced suspiciously around and lowered his voice until it was no louder than his late whisper.

"Are we alone?" he asked.

"All alone."

"Then I can remember more than I have forgotten. It is not safe to remember when the doctor is around. My memory is quite vivid in regard to you, Miss Heath. I remember very well the day when you brought me here. I was ill almost unto death, and so feeble that I could hardly lift my head. I could not resist. I was brought here, and in this living grave I have been ever since. Oh! yes, I remember you!"

Leah Lee pressed Hendrickson's arm significantly.

"Perhaps you can remember other things which I wish you to remember."

"What are they?"

"Where is Eulalie?"

The man threw back his head and laughed shortly, harshly, while a new gleam appeared in his eyes.

"Don't you wish you could learn?" he said, almost tauntingly. "Don't you wish you could find her, and torture her as you have tortured me?"

"Madman!" Floralice exclaimed, "you know that no one else loves her as tenderly as I."

"Aye, even as the hawk loves the dove. I may be crushed by imprisonment here, and fast becoming an imbecile, but my memory is vivid in regard to the past. Merciful heavens! what had that poor child done that you should hate her so bitterly? What crime had she committed against you? What was her offense, except that she was as gentle as you were harsh and unfeeling? And now you ask for her! I would as soon help the tiger seize his prey!"

The ragged man spoke vehemently, and Floralice recoiled from him. Again Leah pressed Hendrickson's arm, and he felt that he was getting all that he had been promised. No actual light had been thrown on Floralice's life, but it seemed impossible to longer believe her anything but an evil, scheming woman.

Yet she answered bravely enough.

"Every accusation you bring against me is false. Poor Eulalie was the light of my heart, and she would say even now, if permitted to speak, that I never even spoke harshly to her. But where is she? What is the explanation of that epoch in your life which I could never penetrate? Where is Eulalie?"

"Beyond your reach, I hope," the prisoner answered, in a deep voice.

"I have come, Byron Brooks, to implore you to break your reserve and confide in me. Eulalie is not the person to fight the world alone. She needs a strong arm to lean upon. You are powerless to help her—tell me where you left her, so that I can trace and help her. There are times when I think that you are not all bad, and if you can prove this, and will give me a clue to work upon, I will try to unravel the tangled web of the past, free you from prison and open a new future to you. At least, do not deny me a clue to Eulalie. The uncertainty surrounding her fate has imbibed all the later years of my life. Tell me where she is, I implore you!"

The prisoner folded his arms and looked steadily at the speaker. His former humility, real or assumed, was gone, and he looked strong, stern and aggressive.

"You can talk as sweetly as an angel," he retorted, "but I know that your tongue is like a serpent's. It stings through sweetness. Your plea is all for nothing—for Eulalie's sake, I refuse to tell where I last saw her. I have not forgotten your past; I have not forgotten the fierce revengeful woman who lured a heartbroken convict from his place of captivity, and then, with the aid of a brute ally, threw him in the river to drown."

"Still incorrigible!" sighed Floralice.

"Still sane, thank Heaven, despite the horrors of a mad-house!" he retorted.

"Why will you not escape those horrors when you have a chance? Tell me what I wish to know and you shall be free."

"I decline."

"You prefer to stay here?"

"Yes."

"Then you shall stay!"

Miss Heath spoke angrily, and arose as she spoke, but she had taken only one step away when she turned to him again.

"I cannot bear to go and leave you here."

"I am content."

"Has life lost all charms for you?"

"Thanks to you, it has."

"I believe you are, indeed, mad."

"Think what you will, only don't come here again. All your wheedling is lost, and you can neither coax nor frighten me into helping you to further revenge. Understand that, and leave me alone."

"Enough, then," she retorted. "You can stay as long as you see fit. You are proof against common sense; stay here if you will. You can go."

The prisoner bowed, moved toward the door and left the room. As he passed out a stalwart man took his arm and closed the door behind him, and then he disappeared from view.

Miss Heath turned to one side of the room and

sharply pulled a green cord which dangled from an opening above.

"She is calling for some one to show her out," said Leah Lee. "What do you think of her now?"

"What can I think?"

"Isn't it a clear case?"

"Altogether too clear. That poor fellow looked wretched enough to unnerve any ordinary criminal, but it did not seem to move her. Who is, or was, this Eulalie, of whom she spoke?"

"I don't know; some enemy of hers, I suppose."

"She avowed a love for her."

"She was trying to wheedle the prisoner, but, thank heaven, he was strong enough to resist her arts. I wish I knew the full meaning of this affair. No ordinary quarrel could stir up such a breeze. Miss Floralice Heath must be a queen of female devils."

The blunt, harsh speech grated on Hendrickson's ears. He was still watching Floralice. She stood in deep thought now, but the expression on her face seemed to be one of deep sorrow. She raised her hand and brushed it across her eyes. Tears? It seemed impossible. Tears were incompatible with the hardness of heart she had shown.

"Incomprehensible!" he muttered.

"She is waiting for some one to show her out," added Leah. "The delay irritates her. Ah! she rings again!"

Floralice did ring again, but no one appeared. She had thrown off her meditative mood and was impatient to go. Several minutes elapsed, but still her summons was unanswered. She moved to the door and opened it.

As she did so a cloud of smoke swept into the room. She recoiled for a moment as though it stifled her, and then ran out and the half-closed door concealed her from view.

Hendrickson looked suspiciously at the smoke which was steadily entering the room.

"I don't like this," he said, abruptly. "Our work is done; let us get away."

There was a suspicion in his mind which he did not see fit to express to Leah, but just then a current of air blew the door wide open. They saw a cloud of smoke, and beyond it was a red, quivering pillar of flame.

"Great heavens!" gasped the Gypsy girl; "the asylum is on fire!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESPERATE FIGHT FOR LIFE.

THERE seemed no room to doubt this assertion. The smoke, the red blaze, Floralice's flight—all pointed to one conclusion. The asylum was on fire, and the flames seemed to have gained good headway.

Leah's first exclamation had been one of dismay, but her natural courage came to her aid and she followed it up with a laugh.

"Let it burn!" she exclaimed. "The crazy folks can well be spared, and we are near the door. Come on! I don't want to eat smoke and fire."

Her confidence in their ability to escape easily gave her a reckless gaiety which was unpleasant, and as she ran away Hendrickson followed with a frown and a troubled look combined on his face. To him it seemed a terrible thing for a place filled with unreasoning human beings to be on fire.

No smoke interrupted their progress and they soon reached the small room at the entrance, but the doorman was gone. No one was on guard.

A door of iron bars had been closed inside the wooden one, and as Leah seized and tried to open it, the fact became clear that it was locked.

"It won't open!" cried the girl, the indifferent look vanishing from her face.

Hendrickson laid hold of a bar and shook the door. It proved to be firm. He glanced at the windows. All were crossed by bars of unusual thickness.

"How are we to get out?" demanded Leah, who no longer saw anything laughable in the affair.

"Where are the keepers of the place?"

"I don't know, unless they've run away like cowards, and left us to burn in this horrible place."

"The doors are all closed—if they have gone, it is a deliberate trap for us or some one else. The question must be settled at once. Come with me; the keepers must be found. I will help them fight the flames, but you must be allowed to go at once."

Hendrickson was aroused to the necessity of prompt action. He ran back to the room they had lately left, followed by Leah. Still no signs of human life were to be seen, but the smoke was growing thicker.

He dashed open another door and found himself in a large hall. There the air was laden with smoke, but he scarcely heeded it. From the floor above came sounds of voices, and with coherent orders were mixed wild yells and shouts.

The employees were evidently fighting the flames, while the mad inmates expressed their excitement in cries which had little or no coherence.

The detective could not remain inactive at

such a time, and he dashed up the wide stairway. It was toward the cloud of smoke and fire, but he would not remain inactive while human lives were in danger.

He now saw the employers in the corridor rapidly passing water in buckets to dash upon the hottest of the fire, but his experienced eyes at once told him that it was a waste of time, and at a moment when every second of time was precious. He ran forward among the men and raised his voice in a clear shout:

"Give up this useless work and attend to the mad inmates. The asylum is doomed—look to the human lives that are in danger!"

"Hallo!" cried a burly fellow, who looked to be a mere brute. "Here's one o' the cranks loose. At him, boys! hustle him back, or the old man will give us a rakin' when he shows up."

Several buckets went clattering down, and late holders turned upon Hendrickson.

"Stop!" he cried; "I am not a madman, but a visitor here. Leave me alone!"

Further speech was checked, as several of the men sprung upon him together. The idea of a fight with them had not occurred to him, and though his revolver was where he could easily have drawn it at first, he neglected to do so until he found himself fully in the power of his assailants.

They then held him in such a vise-like manner that he was utterly helpless.

"Vacant cell right back of us!" called out one. "Chuck him in there, and we can change him afterward, if he don't get cremated."

And, despite his struggles and attempts to explain, Hendrickson was rushed across the corridor and flung headlong into a cell. He fell to the floor, and when he arose the iron-barred door was closed and locked, and the keepers had returned to the battle with the flames.

The state of affairs alarmed the detective. He had been mistaken for a lunatic, or, at least, for a prisoner, and as he had entered the asylum secretly, it might have been hard in any case to establish the fact that he ought to be allowed to go.

Could he have seen his face then, he would almost have wondered if he was really himself. In the struggle with the men who had been fighting the fire it had become blackened that he looked almost like a negro.

But it was not this that troubled him then. If the signs of the times were reliable, he would not be subjected to any slow process of recognition. The fire had gained such headway that he did not see any possible chance of saving the building, and the employees seemed inclined to keep the prisoners in their cells.

A horrible death now stared these unfortunates in the face.

Hendrickson was subjected to the same danger.

Unless he could escape, he bade fair to be burned alive in the doomed building.

He laid hold of the bars of the door and shook it with all his force. It resisted every effort. It had been made to defy the strongest of raving maniacs, and the workman had made no mistake.

The key had been left in the lock, but as it was beyond his reach, this counted for nothing.

He glanced eagerly along the corridor. For a time he had forgotten Leah Lee, but he now looked for her anxiously. He would have given almost anything to see her then, but the conclusion was forced upon him that when he rushed up the stairs she had refused to follow where smoke and flame were playing havoc.

Clearly, he was left to his fate.

The fire was making steady progress. The building was old and had never been fire-proof in any degree. Now that the fire-fiend had gained a hold, there seemed no hope whatever of saving it.

Hendrickson had never taken part in a wilder, more stupid scene. It was stupid because the keepers persistently fought the flames when it was clear that their efforts should have been devoted to saving the prisoners.

And wild! The prisoners, insane or sane, had grown very much excited, and their cries made the place ring with an uproar that seemed fiendish.

The detective looked about the cell for something with which he could attack the door, but there was absolutely nothing that could be used. He was perfectly helpless, and the rapidly-gaining fire sent clouds of smoke rolling into his cell which almost stifled him.

He added his voice to those of the other prisoners.

It was not the unreasoning outburst of fear, but a systematic attempt to show some one that a mistake had been made. He might as well have talked to the walls of his cell; no one was calm enough to pay attention to him.

"Fools! Brutes!" he finally broke forth in anger and disgust. "Have they lost their heads entirely? Do they want to sacrifice all these helpless people?"

Again he shook the cell door, but it was as firm as ever.

Along through the corridor poured the thick, stifling smoke, and Hendrickson felt that he must soon succumb. It was a very mockery then that he had two revolvers in his pockets.

He had come prepared to defend himself against human foes, but not against the fire-fiend.

Suddenly a man rushed past his cell gesticulating wildly and laughing at the top of his voice.

This was no keeper; plainly, it was one of the mad inmates, and Hendrickson's hopes arose. After all, some one had grown sensible enough to begin this too-long-delayed work of freeing the unfortunates.

Others followed the first, and he looked eagerly for the hand which should turn the key of his own cell.

When some one appeared he grew amazed. He had expected to see a keeper, and great was his surprise when he beheld Floralice Heath. The work that they had neglected was being done by her, and his turn had come at last.

Without a look into the cell the girl's hand touched the key, but at that moment a brawny keeper rushed out of the cloud of smoke and dragged her back.

"Here, what are you doin'?" he shouted. "Who the fiends are you who dares interfere here?"

His face was full of fury and he raised one hand as though to strike her, but with a quick movement she escaped his grasp and ran again to the door.

The brute sprung after her, but not agilely enough to prevent her purpose. With a quick motion she turned the key. Another moment and the ruffian had seized her again.

"Curse you!" he cried, "I'll choke the—"

"No, you won't!"

It was a deep, cool voice, and Edgar Hendrickson thrust a revolver under the keeper's nose. The fellow had been brave and headlong enough before that, but it took all the courage out of him. He uttered a startled exclamation, released Floralice and dashed away at the top of his speed. Only an effort had kept the detective from striking him down, but he would not be the cause of leaving the brute unconscious to meet his fate.

Floralice was very pale, but she showed a firmness which surprised Hendrickson. She looked at him sharply, though there was no light of recognition in her eyes. The smut of the fire still made his disguise good.

"Quick!" she exclaimed; "if you have reason enough, help me to rescue your fellow prisoners. They have been left to die. Help me to open their doors, for mercy's sake!"

"I will!"

He made the terse reply and hurried on by her side. Door after door was unlocked and the inmates freed, until the corridor was full of rushing, yelling madmen. Hendrickson, however, never lost sight of Floralice. Hers was a brave, devoted work, but the smoke was growing thicker and life was suspended with death in the balance.

CHAPTER XIV.

DANGER FOLLOWS DANGER.

HENDRICKSON had been watching the progress of the fire as he worked, and as they reached the end of the corridor and liberated the last prisoner, he turned quietly to Floralice.

"There is no more time to lose. We must get from here at once or our lives will not be worth a song. Let me take your arm."

He did so and they hurried along the corridor, disregarding the keepers and late prisoners they saw by the way. It was the detective's purpose to descend the stairs and force a way of escape, but as they reached the coveted point he saw that the stairway was one sheet of flame. The fire had taken a sudden turn and, attacking at the weakest point in a double sense, had cut off all retreat in that direction.

Just as they stood dismayed by this discovery a hand grasped Hendrickson's arm.

He turned and saw the woman with pale eyes.

"Go to the upper floor!" she said, hurriedly.

"There is a fire-escape there. Go at once!"

And then she darted away in the cloud of smoke.

Hendrickson threw his arm around Floralice's waist and urged her to use every effort to escape. The smoke was beginning to overpower them, and he feared that she would faint. Their situation was desperate, and what was to be done must be done quickly.

He had marked the location of the stairs which led above, and now hastened rapidly toward them. There was some evidence as he went that the keepers had at last taken action to save the mad persons, but the detective thought only of Floralice. At that moment he forgot the dark side of her life. She had shown great heroism in helping the unfortunates, but her strength was now wavering, and he almost carried her as he went.

"Have courage!" he exclaimed. "It is only a moment more, and then we will be safe."

"Leave me!" she gasped. "You will only lose your own life in trying to save mine. Leave me!"

"Never!"

"But we shall both die."

"So be it, then; if it should happen so, I ask no more than to die with you!"

He spoke vehemently. At that supreme moment he forgot all save that he loved her. Yes,

deny it as he might in more practical moments, he did not blind himself then.

There might be a cloud on her life, but he loved her.

Up the stairs they went, and he fought his way blindly forward. They collided with the wall of the upper corridor. Where was the door? Which way were they to go to find liberty?

Ha! a door at last, and he staggered forward, almost carrying Floralice. He had the presence of mind to close the door behind them. It stopped the rush of fresh smoke, and that already in the room began to drift out through the window.

Hendrickson hastened to that point and looked out. It was a long distance to the ground, and at first they seemed to be in a more hopeless position than ever. Glancing at one side, however, he saw the welcome fire-escape. It was at the next window.

Something else was to be seen, however.

Two persons were making their way slowly toward the fire-escape, walking on the window-caps. It was most precarious footing, and a single false step would have precipitated them to the ground below—to almost certain death.

Strangest of all, one of these persons was a slight, delicate-looking woman, while the other was a man who bore a child in his arms.

Almost any one else was more to be expected than such a trio; they seemed out of place in or near the asylum.

Even as he looked, the woman reached the balcony of the fire-escape, and in a moment more the man joined her. Then the descent was begun. A hand was laid on Hendrickson's arm. The pure air had restored strength and courage to Floralice, and she looked out with calm, steady eyes.

"Let me go," she said. "I can reach the fire-escape."

"But a fall would—"

"I shall not fall. Let me go."

And she resolutely began the attempt.

Hendrickson had never felt himself more helpless. It seemed a mad attempt, though he had just seen others succeed. But all people had not steady heads and good judgment. Floralice might fall, and then—

He shivered as he saw her begin the attempt. It was a narrow, frail footing, and few, indeed, would have risked it, even with life at stake. Hendrickson almost held his breath as he watched her. What would be the result?

Step by step she went on, steadily nearing the spot of safety, and then—joy flashed over him as he saw her gain the balcony. She had shown courage worthy of a traditional heroine.

Then he made haste to follow. For him it was a feat less risky. He had often tested his head in elevated places, and though he found the footing precarious he made the journey in safety. Floralice was already descending the fire-escape, and he promptly followed.

As he went down he saw that the late prisoners were at liberty and rushing blindly about, while up the avenue came various engines and other fire-vehicles at a gallop. The scene was as wild, if not as dangerous as ever.

Once more on the ground he looked sharply about.

He thought of Leah Lee, who, he felt, had some claim upon him, but she was not to be seen.

Ought he to remain and make sure she had escaped?

He glanced at Floralice. Now that they had escaped the fire she looked pale and worn out. It occurred to him that measures would soon be taken to secure the prisoners, and if they remained there was no knowing what trouble they would get into. If the asylum was as bad as had been represented, sane people were no safer there than mad ones.

The sooner they were away the better.

He turned again to Floralice.

"Let us go while we can," he said.

"You are right," was her quick reply. "This place sickens me, and I long to be forever beyond sight of it."

As she spoke she started at a quick walk toward the road, and he followed beside her. Thus far she had not recognized him. He hoped she would not. If she knew that he was on the scene she could not help suspecting that he had followed her there. Not knowing that the smut on his face was equivalent to a disguise, he expected discovery; but he would not desert her until her safety was assured.

Criminal though she might be, she was still—Floralice!

It was not a long walk to the iron gate which led to the road, but as they advanced toward it, Hendrickson saw that brawny men were on guard there. Clearly, they had been posted to prevent the asylum prisoners from leaving. Would they allow other persons to go?

He felt that this would not be done without vexatious delay, and as a fire-engine moved toward the gate he had a sudden idea.

Could they not pass while the engine was going through, by taking advantage of its cover?

He tried the experiment, and it succeeded to a charm. They passed safely out. Several vehi-

cles were standing close at hand, and his quick eyes marked one as a public carriage.

Better than all the rest, it was empty.

He moved to the driver's side and placed a five-dollar bank-note in his hand.

"Take us to the depot immediately," he said.

It was a generous fare, and the man promptly decided to take it. He could see his passengers but dimly, but supposed them to be escaped prisoners. Plainly, they were not violent, and if he could earn the five dollars he would.

"Get in!" he said, tersely.

The direction was obeyed, the carriage-door slammed together, and away they went. Hendrickson's spirits arose, but they were speedily dashed down. He heard a shout behind them, and, looking around, saw another vehicle dashing after them.

The supposed "escape" had been discovered.

What was to be done? He, at least, had entered the asylum secretly, and it was likely that those who had treacherously admitted him would stoutly deny the fact.

To stop would be to risk trouble, to be subjected to long delay, and very likely Floralice's name would be made public. Instead of ordering a halt, he called to the driver:

"Go on! Outstrip those fellows, and you shall have another five."

"My Lord Duke, you're a trump," returned the man of the reins. "If I've got the horse-flesh to beat them, consider it done!"

And then his whip whistled through the air and fell smartly on the sides of his horses. They responded gallantly, and went shooting away in the darkness at full speed. But in the rear thundered the pursuers, and no one could tell the result. Barring accidents, all depended on the speed and endurance of the respective horses.

"Who are our pursuers?" Floralice quietly asked.

"That I don't know."

"Are you one of the asylum employees?"

He caught at the idea and replied that he was. The darkness was in his favor, and as he saw that she had entirely recovered her coolness, he took care to disguise his voice.

"This has been a terrible night," the girl added, with a shiver.

"You are right."

"Do you know the time?"

"It is about midnight, I think."

"I wish I could catch the 12:5 train."

Hendrickson promptly consulted his watch as they passed a street lamp. The result showed that they would just about catch the train if they continued at their present headlong pace, and the pursuers did not prevent.

He looked back anxiously. The second carriage was coming at what seemed winning speed, but after watching it for a moment he decided that the chances were about even. Both parties were making remarkable speed. The horses were at a gallop, and the vehicles bounced over the pavement almost like rubber balls.

The detective was ill at ease. He was very anxious to get away from the place without any unpleasant explanations, but even if they held their own, the lead was so slight that any delay at the depot would bring the pursuers down upon them.

Who were the pursuers? Prison officials, probably; perhaps officers of law. In any case they were making the race a hot one, were fully in earnest, and would make themselves obnoxious if given a chance.

Silence now reigned in the leading carriage. The detective did not care to talk, lest he should reveal his identity, and Floralice seemed to be in deep thought.

On went the rival racers at the same mad pace, and the depot was near at hand. But where was the 12:5 train? Ha! as though in answer to the question the clanging of a bell became audible above the noise of the carriage, and the train drew up at the depot.

Would they catch it?

Hendrickson thrust more money into the driver's hand, and they rounded a corner at break-neck speed and came to a halt. Hendrickson helped Floralice out. Then he glanced back. There was wreck at the corner they had just left. The pursuers, less fortunate than they, had been overturned, but already the men had picked themselves up and were hastening forward.

And the train was in motion; it was leaving the depot. Floralice uttered a cry of dismay.

"Quick!" exclaimed Hendrickson. "Run forward and prepare to catch at the last car. I will help you on—it is our only hope!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE VANGUARD OF TROUBLE.

It was a moment of thrilling suspense, and the chances seemed fatally against the young people, but both retained their coolness and judgment remarkably. The last car of the train reached them, and, as Floralice put up her hand and grasped the rod, Hendrickson added his strength and raised her to the platform.

Then he sprung after her.

Another moment and the train was gone, and Hendrickson, looking back, had the pleasure of seeing their pursuers chase them several rods down the track and then give up the attempt.

One more danger was safely passed.

His next care was to keep out of Floralice's sight so as to prevent recognition. She was safely on her train and started for Buck Basin, and as it was not likely she would be molested further, he could well leave her alone. He did not want her to know he had been playing the spy upon her.

Muttering some excuse he promptly left her and went to the smoking-car. There he discovered that his face still bore a good deal of smut, and proceeded to get rid of it. Neither he nor Floralice had attracted unusual attention; those who had seen them take the train had supposed them late arrivals, while their pursuers were merely supposed to have missed the train altogether.

Hendrickson sat down in the smoking-car and gave himself up to thought. He was on his way back to Buck Basin, but not in an enviable mood. What he had seen and heard at the asylum troubled him greatly. What was he to think of Floralice Heath? He remembered Byron Brooks, the man of rags and disheveled hair, and could not avoid a shudder. Fair as was her face, he could not find an explanation of her conduct which cleared her from blame.

Anon he thought of Leah Lee. What had become of her? In his devotion to Floralice, the Gypsy girl had been forgotten, and his conscience now reproached him.

He had last seen her in the burning building. Had she escaped, or fallen victim to the conflagration?

If the former, she might be on the same train, and he arose and passed into the next car. He had gone but a few steps when his name was pronounced. There was the dusky girl of the Pyramids, and she eagerly motioned him to sit down beside her. He obeyed.

"I did not know that you were on the train," she said.

"I just made it."

Leah shivered.

"Ugh! what a night it has been! 'Tis seldom I lose my nerve, but fire always terrifies me. Still, I should not have deserted you altogether so unceremoniously had it not been for an adventure I had after leaving you. A madman pursued me, vowing that he had been commanded to sacrifice me to the fire, and when I did get out, I had no desire to remain longer. Besides, you had seen what I took you there to see."

She looked at him slyly, but he did not answer. Then she slowly added:

"What do you think of Miss Heath now?"

"I can have no lofty opinion," he answered, not caring to be explicit.

"I took you there," added Leah, "to show you that there are better women than Floralice Heath."

"Yourself, for instance."

He intended it as banter, to avoid serious comment on the subject of Miss Heath, but Leah started and laid her hand on his, at the same time looking into his face with a strange expression.

"Do you really think so?" she asked.

"Why should I think otherwise?"

This time he tried to make his jesting mood more apparent, for he was suddenly growing afraid of the beauty of the Pyramids, but she was too much in earnest to read him aright.

"Edgar Hendrickson," she said, in a concentrated voice, "if you will think well of me, you will make me the happiest woman alive!"

The young man started.

"Of course I think well of you, but—"

"I don't mean in any cold, calculating way. Don't say you are my friend. I hate the word! Let there be no half-way work in dealing with me. What I want is your LOVE!"

Vehemently she made the declaration, and Edgar Hendrickson felt as though he had been stricken by a serpent. He felt a strong impulse to flee precipitately. Leah was hovering over him like a hawk above its prey, and he felt perfectly helpless. He could only repeat her last word in a feeble way.

"I may seem to you almost like a new acquaintance," she went on, "but it is not so. We have been near each other in Buck Basin for months. I have seen you almost daily. Often I passed your hotel merely to have a glimpse of you. Very seldom did you look at me, but I was there, and my love grew day by day."

"I did not suspect it."

"No, you were blind, like all men. No woman is ever loved but she knows it. And I—I know you do not love me yet, but I live with hope in my heart. I have shown you how unworthy Floralice Heath is, and how much I want you to love me. I would die for you; let me at least know that I may live and hope to win your heart. Your love is earth, heaven, paradise—all, to me!"

She did not raise her voice much above its usual pitch, but it was full of vehemence. Her whole heart was in her plea. She was no cold, straight-laced, finical daughter of fashion, but a woman who demanded the right to speak when her interests were at stake.

She had spoken, as Hendrickson knew to his sorrow.

He quickly recovered his outward composure, for no man can long be cast down by the knowledge that a woman loves him, but there was a

lurking shadow in his mind which made him shrink from Leah Lee.

She had shown her hand. Her motive in making him acquainted with Floralice's inner life was plain. Revenge was at the bottom of it all. He now became aware that she was a dangerous woman, and he wished he had never seen her; never accompanied her on this journey.

"My dear girl," he replied, "I am really sorry to hear you say this. I am grateful to you, for you have shown me kindness, but I don't care to have any woman love me. I have decided to live single."

"Since when did you decide?"

"Since when?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Before I revealed Floralice Heath's real character to you, you were strong in your desire to marry her."

"Nonsense! I never had a thought of it."

"You can't deceive me. I may be poor, and only a Gypsy, but I have eyes of my own. I use them, too. You love Floralice Heath. I won't reproach you, for she has thrown all her arts about you, but I have shown you how foolish your love is. Only for me she would have had you hung by the lynchers."

"You still persist in saying that she thinks me a detective on her track?"

"Yes."

"Why should she do so? How do you know what you allege?"

"I can't tell the source of my information. Don't ask too much. I have warned you; I have shown you my heart. Now leave me and think the matter over. It is one o'clock already; come to me in the morning."

Hendrickson was glad to get away in any form, and he obeyed the first part of the order as quickly as he could and not show undue precipitation. He had seen quite enough of Miss Leah Lee, and although she had probably once saved his life, it was now almost equally certain that she would be a stumbling-block in the way of his future investigations.

Nothing is more dangerous than a woman who sets herself to work to make trouble.

Buck Basin again. The trio, whose fortunes we have last followed, were all back. Miss Heath and the girl of the Pyramids had come on the same train, though not in company, and the former had not seemed to notice Leah at all. One went over from Oaktree in a carriage; the other went on foot.

The following morning Hendrickson appeared at his old haunts. He had been anxious to avoid all suspicion that he had been dogging Floralice, and had waited accordingly.

During the days he had been away there had been one matter of importance which occurred.

In speaking of Shaffer Knight, the agent who had come to Buck Basin once too often, mention has been casually made of his fellow-agent, Ebenezer Pray.

The latter was now at the hotel, and he soon took measures to make Hendrickson's acquaintance. His particular attention was due to the fact that he had something to say, and that Hendrickson stood apart from the ordinary men of the town because of the fact that he did not labor for a living, and, in Pray's opinion, was their social and intellectual superior.

Pray, himself, was a man of fifty years, very tall, very thin, very melancholy of visage, and noted for possessing a heart more or less like flint. He could, however, act the gentleman, and he took pains to be agreeable to Hendrickson.

"By the way," he said, after some conversation, "did you ever see my co-worker, Shaffer Knight?"

"Yes; he was at the hotel once since I have been here."

"When was this?"

"A month, or such a matter, ago."

"Not since?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Ahem! Mr. Knight is missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes. I have learned that he started to come to Buck Basin some days ago. I have even traced him to Oaktree, where he hired a horse and carriage to come on here. The horse found its way back to its quarters before morning, quite lame. The driver has not since been heard of."

Mr. Pray looked more melancholy than ever as he made this announcement. He had been three days in Buck Basin, and had inquired right and left for the missing man. No trace of him could be found.

"This is somewhat singular," Hendrickson observed.

"Very. A man starts from Oaktree for this place. He never gets here. He disappears on the way. What is the natural inference?"

"Had Mr. Knight money, and what was his business in coming here?" Hendrickson asked.

"On these points all is conjecture. I do not believe that he had any money of consequence. His business here I do not know. I have been trying to learn, but there is no clew. At the

point from which he started it is said that he received a letter and left hastily. I argue that there was that in the letter which brought him there, or started him, but no one here will admit writing it."

"Allow me to ask your theory, sir?"

"Foul play!"

Mr. Pray brought his jaws together with a snap after these words, and looked decidedly wolfish.

"Do you suspect the guilty parties?"

"Allow me to put a question ahead of yours, Mr. Hendrickson. You are a non-resident here, and, of course, will regard the matter only in that common light of justice which makes human life sacred. Allow me to ask if you have seen any sign which would give you a suspicion in the case?"

"I regret to say that I have not. Besides, a murderer would take care not to show any signs."

"Humph! Suppose it was a matter that concerned the whole town?"

"How could it?"

"You don't seem well posted. Shaffer Knight was hated here because he was a landlord's agent. May not the whole town have combined to kill him? That's the question to be solved, and I am going to do it. I will find Shaffer's assassin and hang him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FOUND DEAD.

THE passing days had not brought peace and happiness to Brigadier Baldy. On the contrary the additional lines which people noticed in his kindly face did not indicate except in a mild degree the tumult which was in his mind.

Those about him did not notice anything unusual in his manner. He was as kind, genial and sympathetic as ever. If any one brought him, or her, trouble to the Old Brigadier, it found the same careful attention as of old. Nothing in his outward life indicated new trouble.

Yet, every hour was torture to the veteran. He was living under a load which tortured him more than that old wound by which he had reason to remember the stormy days of the war.

The death of Shaffer Knight had changed the whole current of his life, and he believed that he knew how intentional murderers felt. He could not bring himself to take a lighter view of the case. He persistently overlooked the fact that Knight's own fierce temper had led him into trouble, and merely argued that if he had not stopped the agent on the bridge, or had gone to his aid when he called for help, Shaffer Knight would then be alive.

He felt himself a murderer, and what a weight it was upon his mind no one else could have imagined. He might have lived all his life in the midst of crime without feeling the contempt born of familiarity. To him crime was never less than crime, and—he felt himself a murderer.

The blow penetrated deeply to his kindly heart, and he felt that his cup of bitterness was full.

Then came Ebenezer Pray, with his prying eyes and questions. Shaffer Knight was missing. He had last been seen when he started from Oaktree for Buck Basin. He had never reached the village.

We have heard the reasons which led the Old Brigadier to keep Knight's fate secret at the time. Many of these reasons now fell away, but he felt that it was too late to tell anything. He had remained silent several days; to tell the story now would certainly be to be disbelieved.

Ebenezer Pray became the haunting shape of Brigadier Baldy's life. The tall, lank form and melancholy face of the agent seemed omnipresent. He was very much in earnest in his investigations, and the Brigadier saw him only too often.

It was nearly night of the day when Pray and Edgar Hendrickson sat on the hotel piazza when a boy came into the village, with his eyes unnaturally large and a peculiar look on his face.

Plainly, he was very much excited, and when he was asked the cause thereof he told a story which made his mood contagious.

There was a dead man down by the river, he said; a man who was lying in the grass near the river-bank, stiff and still. Who it was the boy did not know. He had been frightened, and had promptly run away.

The news spread rapidly, and a party was soon made up informally to investigate, one of the number being Mr. Ebenezer Pray. He could not help having a suspicion as to the identity of the dead man, and the set expression about his mouth troubled the villagers.

They went to the river under the guidance of the boy. He led them straight to where a solitary tree spread its branches over the stream. A bird of prey, which was resting on one branch, arose sluggishly as they approached and retreated toward the Pyramids.

Reaching the bank they paused. There was no longer use for the boy; all plainly saw what they had come to see. The body of a man lay there, his face concealed by the grass and the arm which was thrown upward. They were in

the presence of death, and the settlers exchanged disturbed glances. They recognized the body, and saw the shadow of deeper trouble cast over Buck Basin.

Ebenezer Pray was the calmest man there.

"Turn him over!" he said, quietly.

They obeyed, and the rays of the setting sun fell upon the set face of Shaffer Knight. This was the end. They were in the presence of death, and if there was any one to mourn for him as a man, that one was not in Buck Basin.

He had been a hard, grasping, unfeeling man, but as an agent they would gladly have seen him alive. One look at Ebenezer Pray's face was enough to show that he would rigidly investigate the tragedy, and they feared that the weight of his anger would fall heavily on Buck Basin. There had often been threats made against Shaffer Knight. These threats might now recoil on those who had made them.

Pray knelt beside the body and began to search for the cause of death, but his investigation amounted to nothing.

There was a slight bruise on Knight's head, in the edge of the hair, but no bullet or knife-wound. Neither was there any discoloration of the neck, to show that he had been strangled.

Pray was puzzled. He had definitely settled in his mind that his late ally had been killed by the men of Buck Basin because they hated him as a landlord. But how had it been done?

He searched the dead man's pockets. About twenty dollars was found in one place, and in another a package of papers. This was all. Pray put the papers carefully away, and directed the men to get means of carrying the body to the hotel.

No one thought of opposing him. No officer was on the spot, but if there had been the agent's orders would doubtless have been as promptly obeyed. Buck Basin dared not offend the man who held the town in the hollow of his hand.

Within an hour the body was at the hotel, and all the people knew of the discovery. They called it a murder. Thus far there was no evidence that violence had been done, if the bruises be excepted, but Pray had pronounced it murder, and that settled the matter.

Brigadier Baldy heard of it in a commonplace way. Sitting at the open window, he overheard one man tell another. They passed on, talking busily, while the Old Brigadier sat alone in the twilight and seemed to bend before the blow like a death-stricken flower in the hot sun. The revelation had come at last. The body was found; there would be an investigation; and—

The old man arose and began pacing the room. What was he to do? Could he go and look upon that dead face? To stay away might be to arouse speedy suspicion, but he felt that it would be more than he could bear to go and see the man who had died in Arrow River—died calling to him for help he never received.

From the lower part of the house came a shrill, peevish voice. Clarence Webber was there, with more liquor aboard than was good for him, and his vigilant mother had discovered some new slight heaped by somebody upon her hopeful offspring. That "somebody" was being soundly abused at a distance by the virago.

"And this is my home!" said the Old Brigadier, with a deep, quivering sigh. "There will be none of my own blood, nor in my own household, to mourn if the hand of law falls upon me."

A heavy knock sounded at the outer door.

The Brigadier started nervously, and then went to the window.

"Only Evan Conrad," he said, with a look of relief. "But I wish even he would not come here now."

There was a little delay, and then young Conrad, tall, broad-shouldered and manly, entered. He did not wait, as usual, for the Brigadier's kindly greeting.

"Have you heard the news?"

"About Shaffer Knight?"

The calmness of his inquiry surprised the Brigadier.

"Yes."

"I merely heard two men mention it as they passed the house," the veteran answered.

"What do you think of it?"

"I have not investigated yet."

"Well, Pray is investigating, and you are wanted at the hotel."

Why Brigadier Baldy did not turn pale is a mystery, for his heart seemed like lead; but his florid face remained the same as ever.

"Why am I wanted?"

"It is plain to all of us that Pray suspects that his fellow agent was killed—murdered—simply because he was such a hard man with his tenants here. All his words point to that conclusion, and I have been asked to come here and request your presence to stem the tide."

"What can I do, my boy?"

"You have the most logical mind and ready form of expression of any of our citizens. In emergencies the people need a leader, and the able men should go to the front. Pray is plainly bound to give us an ill name; the reputation of being murderers; and it is our unanimous wish that you go to the front and stand as a bulwark to repel the curse he would lay upon us."

Brigadier Baldy stood in dazed silence. Why

was he selected for this task? Why had they trusted to have their innocence proved by the only man who was guilty? It was an odd chance, but the idea of facing the dead man was something which almost stunned the Old Brigadier.

For a moment he hesitated, but it occurred to him that if the people of Buck Basin were to be proved innocent, he was the man of all men to do it.

He knew the strong and weak points of the case.

"I will go," he said, simply.

During the walk to the hotel Conrad explained the points thus far discovered, and said that a doctor had just been sent for when he left. When they arrived the doctor had just finished an examination and stated the cause of death—drowning.

"But the bruise on the head?" urged Pray.

"May have been caused by a fall."

"From where?"

"Not necessarily from any great distance. Had he simply stumbled and struck against any hard object, the bruise might thus have been caused."

"Would not a blow from an assassin hand have made a similar bruise?"

"It might."

"And then the assassin might have thrown the body into the river?"

"Yes, though the man was alive when thrown in."

At this moment Brigadier Baldy passed through the group and stood beside the deceased.

CHAPTER XVII.

BUCK BASIN'S CHAMPION.

THOSE who saw the Old Brigadier then thought that he had never looked calmer or more noble. He gazed at Shaffer Knight's set face gravely, but with nothing to indicate what was in his mind. His calmness surprised himself. Before this unfortunate affair his whole life had been as open as day. He had thought himself incapable of subterfuge or double-dealing.

Nature, however, now furnished a mask for his face, and there was nothing to indicate the horror with which he looked on the deceased.

"Well, Benmarsh," said Pray, "you see that my suspicions are corroborated."

"What suspicions, Mr. Pray?"

"Foul play."

"Has this been proven?"

"How can it be otherwise? Shaffer Knight was not the man to drown himself."

"The doctor has said that it may be an accident."

"Nonsense! How could such an accident occur?"

"There have been other cases of drowning in Arrow River."

"That proves nothing. Knight came to Buck Basin on business. He was never a favorite here. Men hated him because he carried out his employer's orders, and secured justice for his employer. If I can once learn the business which brought him to this town, I believe I can name his assassins."

The assertion fell heavily upon the Old Brigadier. If those who had brought the agent there by means of the lie about Evan Conrad were to tell their story again, a bad aspect would be given the case. And as the lie had been told out of revenge, what hope was there that it would not be repeated?

"There is no one here who would stoop to murder a man simply because he was Sinclair Rhodes's agent," the Old Brigadier asserted.

"No ordinary criminal did the deed."

"How do you know?"

"Knight's money was left safely in his pocket. This proves that revenge, not pecuniary gain, led to the crime."

"In my mind, it seems rather to prove the theory of simple accident."

"You seem to have elected yourself spokesman," said Pray, petulantly. "Now tell me how an accident could have caused this."

The men of Buck Basin looked eagerly at Brigadier Baldy. They had unanimously requested him to act as their champion. What could he say in their behalf?

"A very reasonable theory suggests itself to my mind," the veteran answered, in a low but steady voice. "Knight left Oaktree with a horse and carriage. What is more reasonable than to suppose that, as he was crossing the bridge over Arrow River the horse became frightened, shied, overturned the carriage and threw his driver out. Knight's head may have struck against the end of the bridge, causing the bruise and stunning him as he fell to the water. He would then have been easily drowned and his body would have a straight course to float to where it was found. Such an accident might also explain how the horse became lame."

The crowd looked at the Brigadier in joyful surprise. He had shown his powerful mind by evolving an explanation which seemed to them as conclusive. What need was there of further investigation?

Ebenezer Pray, however, sneered perceptibly.

"In this case the horse was only a hundred yards from Buck Basin, and headed that way. He was several miles from Oaktree. Was he

likely to have taken a long journey when a short one was before him?"

"Horses are incapable of reasoning, but instinct will lead them home. As for the way he was 'headed,' if he was frightened it is very likely he wheeled on the bridge the first thing, and ran toward Oaktree."

Brigadier Baldy was surprising himself by his readiness at argument. He had never been aware that he possessed gifts in that direction, and, standing there in the presence of the dead, his energies seemed almost palsied, but he somehow managed to find words to support the point he had taken.

"That's all very well," said Pray, tartly, "but you are arguing to no purpose. There was no accident. Shaffer Knight was murdered, and I am going to prove it!"

So saying he turned abruptly away and the discussion closed.

The men of Buck Basin were somewhat troubled by his last words, but they thought that Brigadier Baldy had made a strong point, and all insisted on telling him so.

"We want you to back up your opinion," said one, speaking for the whole. "Knight was never harmed by anybody here for the reason Pray gives, but he is determined to have it that he was, and we need a strong, clear head to lead us. You are just the man, for even Pray must respect you."

Every man seemed determined to harp upon the Old Brigadier's eminent respectability, little knowing how their words sounded to him.

He was not anxious to be near the place, so he started home. Outside he was accosted by Edgar Hendrickson. The latter had been absent from the village several hours, and had only just returned. One of the men had explained the new cause of excitement, and as the Brigadier came out, Hendrickson joined him and they walked away together.

"They tell me that Pray is looking for the cause of Knight's journey this way."

"Yes, Mr. Hendrickson."

"Has it occurred to you that it was the same night of Evan Conrad's wedding?"

The Old Brigadier started.

"I believe you are right," he said in a low voice.

"Somebody ought to know if he had particular reason for coming there."

"Yes."

"It also occurs to me that those who were at the wedding will have a chance to prove an alibi."

"Yes."

Brigadier Baldy was not at the wedding; he would not have such a chance.

"On the whole, though, this would amount to but little," Hendrickson thoughtfully added. "If Knight left Oaktree at the stated time, and drove at the usual speed, he should have been here before the hour of the wedding."

"The accident probably happened before that."

"The 'accident.' True; it is our position that Knight died because of an accident. Yet it may have been murder."

"Possibly so."

"There are men about here capable of such a deed, as I well know."

Hendrickson had reference to the lynchers, but as he had never mentioned this adventure, he was not understood by the Brigadier.

"I hope suspicion will not fall upon any one."

"If I read Ebenezer Pray rightly, he will have somebody in the toils before long."

This was not comforting to the Brigadier, and when he reached the house he had little appetite for supper. Mrs. Benmarsh had something to say about the tragedy, and she took strong grounds in favor of Knight. He had been a hard man, but murder was wrong, and she hoped some one would hang for it.

Webber was silent for some time, and then he suddenly raised his voice.

"If Knight was really murdered, he only got what he deserved, and we are well rid of him. The best thing Buck Basin can do now is to keep its mouth shut."

His fond mother looked surprised, but, as usual, she turned like a weather-vane now that she knew her son's mind, and was never heard to sympathize with the dead man again.

Ebenezer Pray continued his work indefatigably. He had the instincts of a detective; whether he possessed the ability to judge correctly, and separate the true from the false, remains to be seen.

He took charge of everything, ruled the village doctor and officials as he saw fit, and found absolutely no one to oppose his course. But he was hated more than Shaffer Knight had ever been. The latter had had the full charge of Buck Basin and Pray had been there but once before, but he would probably be their master in future, and was opening the campaign by trying to prove one of them a murderer.

Nobody knew whom he would accuse, but from the knowledge of his methods, the people were not sure but he could accuse any one and hang them, guilty or innocent.

Some one, however, was not in sympathy with the bulk of the population.

When Pray went to his room that night, thor-

oughly tired out, he was surprised to see on the floor a small stone with a piece of white paper attached with a string. He picked it up and found that the white paper was a note addressed to himself.

The few lines which it contained were written in a stiff, curious hand, which bore every evidence of being laboriously disguised, and were as follows:

"You say you want to know what business brought Shaffer Knight to this town. Has it occurred to you as being significant that on the same night one of your tenants, Evan Conrad, was married? A word to the wise is sufficient."

Either Pray was not wise, or the quotation was not to be taken literally. He frowned and meditated, but could get no idea from the note. What had Evan Conrad's wedding to do with the matter?

Plainly, Knight would not have accepted an invitation to witness the ceremony, and Pray knew of no reason why the ceremony should bring his deceased partner to Buck Basin.

"It may be only a hoax, or an attempt to set me on the wrong track," he thought. "Conrad seems to be an honest man, though I don't know how he stands on Knight's books. Poor as all the rest, no doubt. But what of this note? Somebody wrote and threw it in at the window. Who? I would give something to know, but it ain't likely the writer will reveal himself after all his trouble at secrecy."

He read the note repeatedly, and tried to get some meaning out of its ambiguous hints. Had it occurred to him as significant that Evan Conrad was married the same night that his fellow agent took his fatal journey?

"No, it hasn't," he said, aloud; "and this sounds to me like rank nonsense, but no clew shall be left untried. I will investigate the case of Evan Conrad. Open and frank as he seems, he may be the man who killed Shaffer Knight!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DANGEROUS VISITOR.

EVAN CONRAD'S wife was happy. Her married life had not begun with everything in her favor, for they were poor, and the chances of bettering their financial standing while they remained at Buck Basin were not good. She had been accustomed to poverty, however, and her love for Evan had led her to unite her fortunes with his most gladly.

Brigadier Baldy's love for her had been well applied. She was a cheerful, true-hearted little woman, and if her friends had been called upon to make themselves known, nearly every person in the village would have spoken.

All had a good word for her as Edwina Vane; as Mrs. Conrad it was the same, except with those who had been unsuccessful suitors for her hand.

Among these were Clarence Webber and Brian Markoe, though the former had of late paid so much attention to Floralice Heath that Edwina had almost ceased to think of him. Markoe, however, had shown no preference elsewhere, and the glances he had given her from time to time made her fear him.

It was with a feeling of uneasiness, therefore, when, answering a knock at the door on the same evening of the last recorded scenes, she saw Brian there.

His scowl had disappeared, however, and he looked pleasant and friendly.

"Good-evening," he said, blandly. "Are you busy? If not, I would like to step in and tell you the news. There is great excitement at the hotel. I can only stop a moment before going there."

He had worked his point craftily to gain admittance to the house, fearing that he would not otherwise get an invitation, and though Edwina was anything but pleased to see him, she could do no less than ask him in.

He promptly entered, concealing his triumph under the friendly smile which seemed to have become fixed on his face. He had left Evan so occupied at the hotel that he did not think he would be interrupted.

"Are they still talking about the agent's death?" asked the young wife, anxious to have the interview over.

"Yes."

"Have they any theory?"

"Pray suspects."

"Mr. Conrad said that Pray insisted that murder had been done."

"Ah! was your husband troubled?"

"Very much so. He feels sure that Knight met with some accident, as Brigadier Baldy suggested, and he dislikes to have it said that there is a murderer in our town."

"Naturally."

"I am sure it was an accident."

"But Evan was troubled, you say?"

"He was afraid some innocent person would be accused of having killed Knight."

"He said that, did he?"

There was something in Markoe's manner which troubled Edwina, though she did not know why, and she hesitated before answering:

"He said it was general talk."

"Has it occurred to you that all this occurred the night of your wedding?"

"Yes; Evan and I spoke of it."

"Why do you suppose Knight was coming here?"

"I really don't know."

"It is singular that Evan did not meet him when he was walking by the river that night."

Edwina looked surprised.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh! he went out, you know, and walked along the river to have his last bachelor smoke, just before he went to be married. Perhaps you remember he was somewhat late that evening, and that people bantered you about the 'missing bridegroom.' Rather odd that Evan did not see the tragedy, or hear a cry for help, or anything of that sort."

Edwina experienced sudden alarm. Brian Markoe spoke significantly, looked at her significantly. What did he mean by such an association of ideas? She did not understand, but she feared the dark-faced visitor more than she had ever done before.

"I was not aware that Evan took any such walk," she answered.

"He has so stated, himself. But he had better not tell Ebenezer Pray. The crafty agent might connect the fact that Evan was at the place of Knight's death at the very moment that it is supposed to have taken place."

Markoe smiled as he spoke, but it reminded Edwina of a wolf.

"I don't know why he should do any such thing!" she declared, indignation in her voice, for his meaning was no longer to be doubted.

"Wait! There is one thing more than I have told. There is a man in Buck Basin who says that he saw Evan and Shaffer Knight talking that night, and the agent declared that the marriage must not take place. Knight said Evan was as poor as a beggar now, and that with increased expense he would not be able to pay Sinclair Rhodes his due. Evan answered hotly that no man should stand between him and you. That was all my informant heard, and I told him to bury his secret so deep that it would never be heard by another man."

Edwina sat with a pale face, but with two red spots at the cheeks.

Alarm and anger were struggling for the mastery.

She did not believe Brian Markoe, and did think that all this was a creation of his own mind, but she dared not tell him so. He was showing himself a dangerous man, and to anger him might be to cause him to tell this story elsewhere.

"I am sure the man was mistaken," she almost gasped.

"He said he was sure."

"But he may have wished to injure Evan."

"He certainly did not, and he vowed that nobody could make him tell that which would harm Evan. But the poor fellow was almost broken down by the secret. He said he had loved Conrad, and now—well, forgive me, but he said there could be no doubt that Evan killed Knight!"

"He told a base falsehood!" cried the young wife, indignantly.

"In any case, he will be silent."

"Evan would not harm any one."

"Not premeditatedly, perhaps."

"Not under any circumstances!"

"Pardon me, but you forget that Knight threatened to prevent the wedding, and—"

"I do not believe it. Whoever told you lied willfully. I do not believe Evan met Knight by the river; I know he did not. No man is more gentle than he, and he would not harm his worst enemy. You say the agent threatened to prevent the wedding. How could he prevent it?"

"There was something said about arresting Evan, for some alleged dishonesty about his contract with Rhodes. Now, my dear friend, I do not want you to regard me as your enemy, for I am the best friend you have in the world. I thought it was my duty to tell you this, however, so that you could be careful and hide his secret. I pity you most sincerely. It is bad enough to be doomed to everlasting poverty, but to be the wife of a murderer is worse."

Edwina's courage was rising. She believed that she had read this too-sympathetic visitor, and she determined to test him.

"If I thought I was the wife of a murderer, I would not remain in this house another night," she said.

A sudden gleam appeared in Markoe's eyes.

His face flushed and he exclaimed:

"If you mean that, you can command another, and more honorable, man who would gladly give you shelter, money, love and protection. Edwina, I love you as well as I ever did—no, a thousand times more. Why will you remain here with a murderer? Go with me, and we will flee from Buck Basin and never more be seen here. I will make a happy home for you, and you shall reign as queen of my heart while life remains. Tell me, Edwina, will you go?"

He poured forth the words vehemently, too much excited to read the expression on her face, but at the end she arose.

She was very pale, but the hand which she stretched out toward the door did not tremble in the least.

"Go!" she said, in a voice which no one would have believed her capable of using, so hard and stern was its inflection. "You have revealed yourself in your true colors at last, Brian Markoe, and now I know that all you have said was false. You came here simply to poison my mind against my husband, but I despise you and your arts. Go, and never dare come again!"

Markoe stood dumfounded.

"But, Edwina—"

"Don't dare speak my name!" cried the little woman, stamping her foot angrily on the floor. "Never even dare to speak to me again. I know you as you are, and I despise you."

Brian's face became a dark red.

"You shall suffer for this!" he hoarsely declared.

"I defy you!"

"Perhaps Evan Conrad can do the same."

"If he knew of your errand here you would feel the weight of his strong hand."

"I don't care a picayune for him or his heavy hand. I'm ready to meet him with revolver, knife, or bare fists any time. But what I meant was that he shall yet rest in a murderer's cell. You say I have only been lying. Wait and see!"

"Brian Markoe, would you repeat your falsehood?"

"I shall do nothing. Just as sure as the sun rises and sets this crime will be traced to Evan Conrad. I don't know whether he is guilty or innocent, and I don't care. Shaffer Knight came here to see Conrad, as I know, and though I shall not tell it to him, Pray is sure to learn the fact. Then your precious husband will be in the web!"

"He is innocent!"

"Innocent men often hang," Brian retorted, with a short laugh. "It may be so in this case. Well, I'm off now."

He turned toward the door, but, suddenly seized with an impulse which, a few minutes later, he was willing to admit was madness, abruptly wheeled and caught Edwina by the wrist.

"Give me a kiss, darling, before I go!" he said.

The young wife started indignantly back, and tried to free her hand; but his hold was too strong.

"Let me go!" she panted. "You cowardly villain, let me go!"

Markoe laughed mockingly, drew her toward him and bent to press his lips to hers, but as he did so something like an avalanche seemed to strike him in the side of the head, and in a moment more he lay sprawling on the floor.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WEB TIGHTENS.

It seemed for a moment to Brian Markoe as though the world was collapsing, but he and his surroundings finally settled down and he looked up understandingly.

He knew he had been knocked down by an uncommonly hard blow, and expected to see Evan Conrad, but instead, it was the eccentrically clad individual who called himself Game Chicken.

The ex-pugilist had thrown his head on one side and was surveying the fallen man with a grin on his face.

"Time!" he called, in a business-like voice. "Toe the scratch, or the match will be given ag'in' you."

"You ruffian!" gasped Markoe, "did you hit me?"

"Hit you? Bless ye, no. Reckon you hit your heel ag'in' a pin an' fell."

The fallen man slowly arose, and then bent a most malevolent gaze upon Game Chicken.

"I am tempted to kill you for that!" he said, in a deep, husky voice.

"Go right on an' do it, ole man."

"Not now; but you will see me again."

"Bless yer dear heart, don't put it off. Now is the app'nted time. Wade right in, Marquis o' Queensberry, an' let go yer dukes. I'd really admire a four-round turn with ye. I'm rusty fur want o' practice, but by the last round I might pick up a bit. Come on, an' ef you don't smash me all ter pieces I'll promise ter stay all through ther 'mill. Toe ther scratch an' hammer me a bit, do!"

"I have nothing to do with such as you."

"No? Rather fight a woman, p'raps."

"Sneer on!" hissed Markoe. "It's your turn now, but don't you think you have seen the end of this affair. I will live to be avenged for that blow, but I shall take my own time and place. I am going now."

"Wait a bit. Young woman, shall I let him go, or shall I proceed ter walk all over him an' mutilate his statuesque form 'cordin' ter Marquis o' Queensberry rules? I'm a tender-hearted man, but there is times when ther good o' s'ciety demands that certain people be all chewed up. Young woman, shall I chew?"

Game Chicken scowled until he looked like a pirate preserved from the days of piracy's glory, but Edwina quickly replied:

"No—no, let him go; I ask no more. Let him go and never return."

"You hear, do ye? You're ter evacuate ther

premises permanent an' eternal. Your phiz don't fit inter ther normal surroundin's hyar. Only handsome men like me does. P'int yer nose south an' chase it out!"

"Are you done?" asked Brian, anxious to establish the fact that he was not frightened.

"That depends. Ef ye go at once, I'm done; ef not, I ain't done till I've pawed up a sixty-foot furrer in ther ground with yer corpse."

"I plainly perceive that I am not wanted. I will go, and leave Mrs. Evan Conrad with her chosen, select and aristocratic friend. Of course I have no chance."

And then Brian made an exaggerated bow and passed quietly out. Game Chicken looked after him thoughtfully, dissatisfaction on his face.

"Shall I foller an' spar him eighty or ninety rounds, Queensberry style?" he asked.

"No, no; let him go. I am glad to get rid of him. Thank you very much for coming to my aid."

"Don't mention it. The exercise was o' great value ter me ez a tonic. Ef I had got a hack at him fur four rounds, I wouldn't 'a' needed no spring medicine for some centuries. Won't Evan belt him when you tell him about it?"

"I shall not tell him."

"Eh?"

"I want this matter to be kept secret."

"No!"

"Yes, and I rely on you to be silent."

"By Bendigo! you give me pain, but ther commands o' fair woman is sacred ter ther disciples o' ther ring. W'ot you say shall be did, an' not a peep will I peep. That settles it. Which reminds me I dropped in ez I were passin' ter d'liver a message from Evan. He is delayed at ther hotel, whar they are still talkin' about Shaffer Knight, but will be here soon."

"Is there any new light on the case?"

"Not a reliable ray. O' course Knight was drowned accidental. Clear case! But Ebenezer Pray is so consarned sot in his ways that nothin' but an 'arthquake kin convince him. He's bound ter hang somebody. Wal, mum, I'm gone. Don't think you will have no more trouble with B. Markoe, Esquire. Ef yer do, send fur me an' I'll walk all over his anatomy. Farewell!"

Game Chicken had reached the door. He now made a deep bow and went out.

Edwina was left alone, and she was glad it was so. She did not fear that Brian Markoe would return, and she wanted a chance to think. To think! Before that, this had been a pleasure, and she regarded herself as one of the happiest and most fortunate little women in the world.

Markoe's visit had changed all that, and dark clouds now rested upon the horizon of her life. She shivered as she thought of what he had said. Evan in danger of arrest as a murderer! It was a terrible thought. Not for a moment did she believe he had harmed Shaffer Knight, or even seen him that fatal evening, but serious trouble would certainly occur if Markoe told others what he had told her.

"And he will tell, I am sure. He is very angry, and honor finds no place in his nature. Oh! what shall I do? Shall I tell Evan? No, no; it may be that Markoe was only trying to frighten me; that he invented all that he said. I will not trouble Evan by speaking of such an absurd thing—he is so innocent and good!"

But it was not so easy to quiet her own fears, and all her efforts to be cheerful could not banish the idea that serious trouble was ahead.

Markoe was eager for revenge, and once let Pray suspect Evan Conrad and he would hunt him down, guilty or innocent. Poor Edwina! clouds have quickly arisen on that sky which had seemed so fair and promising.

The following day saw no change of importance in the situation. Ebenezer Pray worked diligently, but he gained no light. In his pocket he carried the note which had been flung in at his window, but it was as ambiguous as ever and the writer did not come forward to declare himself.

The suspicion cast upon Evan Conrad by the note was not heightened by Pray's inquiries; he could learn nothing which would make the insinuation significant. Conrad, himself, gave more or less aid during the day, and Pray could not help feeling that he was one of the most honest of Buck Basin's citizens.

The words of the note still rung in his ears, however.

Had it occurred to him as significant that on the same evening Evan Conrad had been married?

What did it mean?

During the day Shaffer Knight's remains were consigned to the earth. Pray knew nothing about his past history or his friends, and the hour of burial could not be postponed.

There had been a post-mortem examination, and a coroner's jury, but the doctor proved himself incompetent, and both he and the jury worked under Pray's thumb, as it were.

They dared to do only what he told them, and while the doctor was allowed to give drowning as the direct cause of death, Pray caused them to ignore the possibility of accident and intro-

duce a clause indicating that they had suspicions of foul play.

It was his verdict, not theirs.

Evening brought another link in the chain. A man who lived at Oaktree had heard of the tragedy, and he came over to say that he could give a point which might have bearing on the case. Pray at once became interested.

"What do you know?" he abruptly asked.

"Wal, ye see I was out on ther Oaktree road, havin' been ter see ter my animiles, when I seen a lame hoss an' wagon goin' toward my town—ther hoss was lame, I mean. It passed right nigh ter me, an' I recognized it. Ther hoss was Abe Tucker's—the same that Knight is said ter have had."

"Was Knight there?"

"Nobody was thar; ther vehicle was empty."

"Did the horse seem frightened?"

"Not any. Now, ther p'int is right hyar: Knight left Oaktree at seven o'clock. Ef he had had a sound hoss an' driv at ther usual speed, he could hev gone ter Buck Basin an' back ter Oaktree in about two hours an' a half, steady drivin'. When I seen ther hoss it was nigh back ter Oaktree, an' it was only a quarter past eight."

"I don't fully grasp your meaning yet."

"Wal, I'll try ter make ye. I've heerd it said that some allow ther hoss got skeered on Arrow River bridge, an' pitched ther driver overboard. What I am drivin' at is this: Ef ther hoss had been sound, an' had gone as fur as ther bridge, he couldn't 'a' got back ter Oaktree with ordinary gait afore half-past nine. Ef he had run part o' ther way, bein' skeered, he might have got back at nine. This is w'ot a sound hoss might 'a' done. Now, a lame hoss got back afore half-past eight. W'ot is ther natural inference?"

Pray looked triumphant.

"Simply that the horse never went as far as the bridge. Consequently, no accident could have occurred as some people claim."

"But the keeper of the livery stable says the horse did not get back until much later," urged one of the citizens.

"I don't claim ter know when the hoss got ter ther stable, but I did see it within half a mile of the town at quarter past eight. How much time it took ther rest o' ther way I don't know."

The story was a serious blow to the theory of the men of Buck Basin. He who had told it was considered a reliable man, and it utterly demolished their claim of an accident at the bridge. It would establish the fact to any unprejudiced mind that if any accident had occurred it had been miles away from Arrow River. Either the horse had in no way caused Knight's death, or some one had afterward carried the body a long distance.

Pray looked as exultant as one of his melancholy expression could.

"I think this effectually disposes of those here who have been trying to hamper me and defeat the ends of justice," he said, curtly, "and I shall now press the case. I shall at once send for a detective, and the facts will be gotten at and the guilty parties given the extreme penalty of the law."

CHAPTER XX.

DANGER FOR FLORALICE.

EDGAR HENDRICKSON was in an unsettled frame of mind. After his return to Buck Basin from the scenes of the burning asylum, he had said to himself:

"I will arrest Floralice Heath, and take her back to the prison from which she helped the convict to escape. She can be tried for that, at least, and she has proved that her heart is all evil."

And then his mood changed and he thought:

"She may not be so very guilty, and she is a woman. I will not be too hasty. I will investigate carefully, and try to learn her secret before molesting her, but I will go no more to her house. Her siren song will weaken my resolution."

But he found that every hour that he kept away was so much time of restless, painful loneliness, and he changed his position yet again.

"How can I investigate unless I am with her, seeking to gain her confidence? That is the only way. Duty requires me to go, and I will do so!"

It was only an excuse and he knew it. He wanted to see Floralice, not as a criminal to be hunted down, but as a woman. And he went, knowing that his heart would overcome his head.

It was the same hour when Ebenezer Pray was receiving the bit of evidence which had so encouraged him. Floralice and Hendrickson were together in the parlor where we have once before seen her entertain him, and get rid of Tom Sowders so summarily.

Hendrickson thought he had never seen Floralice in a more charming mood. Always charming, her lightest mood was usually one of gracious loveliness. On this occasion her mood approached vivacity, and she jested with an archness which surprised and bewildered him. Every word, look and gesture strengthened the chain which was upon him.

And could this be the stern, revengeful woman

he had seen at the asylum? He would have doubted it if he could, but the evidence was irrefragable.

"Do you know, Mr. Hendrickson," she finally said, "I think I shall leave Buck Basin soon."

"Indeed! Is not this a sudden resolution?"

"Not particularly. I did not come here to remain a lifetime—I hope."

"Shall you then go East?"

"That I don't know."

"I hope you will not go without informing me."

"And why not, pray?"

"Would it be just to a friend?"

"Should you inform me, if you were going?"

"Certainly I should. Can you suppose otherwise? You must set a poor value on friendship if you could suppose me capable of breaking off the friendship between us. I hope that it will be enduring," Hendrickson asserted.

"My experience is that separation soon destroys friendship—yes, even recollection."

"I hope you are not speaking for yourself."

"I speak for the world."

"Don't do that, Miss Heath. The world is cold, harsh, hollow and unfeeling. Copy from the world and you have a mere desert. One should seek, rather, the oases by the way."

Floralice sighed.

"There is no oasis in some lives."

"Make them, then. Good intentions fertilized with good deeds will create an oasis. But I trust that your life has not been a desert."

Floralice was about to reply when a knock sounded at the door of the parlor. Both supposed that the applicant was the landlady, little thinking that, the outer door being open, it was some one who had just come from the street.

Miss Heath arose and opened the door. A rough-looking, muscular man stood outside; a stranger to Hendrickson at least, who looked at him in anything but a friendly way.

"Good-evenin' ma'am," he said, with a short, awkward bow. "Is one Edgar Hendrickson here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want to see him. Be you him?"

The stranger had stepped over the threshold and was looking at the younger man.

"I am he," curtly answered Hendrickson.

"Ha! glad I've found ye. I've come on business. I ain't got no card with me, but my name is Brown, an' I'm from —. We've got an insane asylum thar, or did hev until it was burned up, an' I was a keeper thar."

Mr. Brown spoke in a deep, hearty voice, and he helped himself to a chair with great freedom, and, still keeping his hat on, spread himself out as though to be comfortable at any cost.

Hendrickson glanced quickly at Floralice.

She stood looking at the visitor like one dazed, and Edgar saw that her eyes had a wild, startled look, while her face was very pale. She suddenly glanced at Hendrickson, met his own gaze, and then turned suddenly and sat down near the window where her face was partially in shadow.

Back to Brown went Edgar's regard.

"Well, sir, what have I to do with your business here?" he brusquely asked.

"Nothin', unless you see fit ter help me, but yer see the chief o' p'lice o' our city mentioned you an' advised me ter apply ter you fur help."

"In what way do you need help?"

"I'm lookin' fur a woman named Hughes."

There was a sudden movement from the quarter where Floralice sat.

"I know nobody of that name," curtly answered Edgar.

"Very likely. No doubt that was an alias. But I opine she's in this town under another name. Leastwise, so we hev been told."

"My good man, your talk is all Greek to me. Pray come to the point at once and let me know just what you want. I have no time to waste."

"Nor me. I've got a hoss, wagon and man out here, an' he's waitin' ter learn whether he goes back ter Oaktree alone, or has me fur a passenger. I'll be brief. I mentioned an asylum, ye know. Wal, this was burned up a few days ago, an' we b'lieve it was sot by a woman—this same Hughes female I told you on. She had an inmate thar, you see, an' in sech cases people usually want ter git rid o' them. We suspect she sot the fire ter bag her game, but, bless yer heart, we couldn't hev our fine buildin' burned down jest ter gratify her spite."

"Still I don't see."

"I'm comin' to it; don't hurry me. We got a letter—ther doctor did—sayin' that ef we would apply ter one Edgar Hendrickson, o' this town, he would tell us who an' what ther woman was. 'Hendrickson,' sez our chief o' p'lice; 'I know him. He's jest ther man, an' he will help ye. Go ter him.' So said ther chief, an' I am come, ez you see."

"Have you the letter you mentioned?"

"No."

"Is it destroyed?"

"Don't know; it was the doctor's."

"Was the writer a man or woman?"

"That I don't know. No name was signed."

"Well, my man, you have evidently been hoaxed. I know nothing whatever about the matter."

Brown looked dismayed.

"You don't?"

"No."

"I feel sure ther woman is hyar."

"Why do you think so?"

"Wal, I dunno, except that ther writer seemed ter be sincere."

"Of course. What good would the hoax have been otherwise. It is not complimentary to me, as I must have been an ally of the woman to know anything about it. Pshaw! Somebody has been playing a trick on you. There is no woman named Hughes in this town, and no fire-fiend. You can take my word for that."

"Wal, by ther Old Nick, this is complercatin'. I felt dead sure it was all right."

"Never trust an anonymous writer again. That's the best advice I can give you."

Mr. Brown was silent and thoughtful for a moment, and then he slowly turned to Floralice:

"I s'pose, ma'am, that you do not know sech a party?"

"I do not."

Calm and clear was Miss Heath's reply. A vein of indifference ran through it, but she seemed perfectly willing to answer such a reasonable question.

"Wal, I reckon I am done up. Ef I knew who made me all this journey fur nothing, I'd descend on him like a cyclone."

The speaker arose, and then added:

"Sorry ter hev troubled ye, an' now I'll take myself off. By ther way, ef ye hear o' this Hughes woman, send word ter the chief o' p'lice, will ye, Mr. Hendrickson?"

"With pleasure."

And then Mr. Brown said good-night and went out. The team which had brought him from Oaktree was several rods away down the street, and he started that way. Only a few steps had he taken, however, when a woman darted from the shadow of the building and grasped his arm.

"Where is your prisoner?" she fiercely cried.

Brown recoiled. He had not expected to see any woman there, and the abruptness with which this one swooped down upon him, and the vehement way in which she spoke, startled him. He stood staring at her blankly, but as a veil was thrown over her face and head, he could tell little or nothing about her.

"Wh-wh-what?" he finally stammered.

"Where's your prisoner?"

"What prisoner?"

"Fool! I am she who wrote the note that brought you here. Have you been in there and come out empty-handed?"

"Oh! you wrote it, did yer? Wal, I'd like ter know why you fooled me."

"I did not fool you."

"Hendrickson says he knows nothin', an' that it was all a hoax."

"Ha! is he still infatuated with her?" cried the woman, in a sibilant voice.

"With whom? Hang it, woman, I've had enough o' this mystery an' mummery. Speak out, now or never!"

"Fool! Have you no eyes, no wits? The woman you want was in the room all the while you were talking. And did you let Hendrickson blind you, and deceive you? Oh! my curse rest on them both!—he is still her slave!"

Up went the woman's clinched hand, and Brown recoiled, fearful that he would receive a blow. His companion seemed to be a sort of tigress.

"Great Scott!" he then said, "you don't mean ter tell me that ther high-toned young woman I see'd in thar was her that set ther asylum afire?"

"Yes, yes; of course it was. You have been blinded, duped. Your prey is even yet in your hands, if you see fit to secure it. No doubt she talked very nice and polite to you, for she is cunning enough."

"Right you be, but now that you hev put me on ther track she won't fool me ag'in. Not much! I'll go straight back an' hev her out o' her den."

"See that you keep up your courage."

"By ther way, I reckon you had better go in with me. You're her accuser, an' we kin settle ther case right soon."

"No; I can't go in," the woman said, starting back.

"But I want you to."

"I must decline."

"What sort o' people be you 'round hyar, anyhow?" Brown cried, in disgust. "You all seem inclined ter clog ther wheels o' justice. Ma'am, I hate ter be rough, but you must go in!"

"Mr. Brown," was the cool reply, "I have, at some risk to myself, put you on the track. I swear that all which I have told you is true. It is now for you to secure your prisoner or not. Good-night!"

She turned away, and, when she saw that it was Brown's intention to stop her by force, suddenly darted off at a rate of speed which quickly left him alone and defeated.

"Well, I'll be shot! Buck Basin clutches ther brown-bread fur freaks. But I'm bound ter hev ther Hughes damsel, anyhow."

And he started back to invade Floralice's quarters again.

CHAPTER XXI.

HENDRICKSON'S BOLD GAME.

WHEN Brown went out, Floralice and Hendrickson turned as though by mutual understanding and faced each other. His expression was earnest, grave and troubled; hers, painfully suggestive of a desire to read his very thoughts.

"I think it will be a long time before I send word to the chief of police," he said, significantly, and referring to Brown's last request.

"Because you don't know where the Hughes woman is?"

"Because I am no hunter of women."

"The Hughes woman, guilty though she is, ought to feel grateful to you."

"I ask no more. Her gratitude is more precious than all the gold the State would pay for an arrested fire-fiend."

A startled look appeared in Floralice's eyes and her lips trembled.

"Do you think you know this unfortunate woman?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes."

Quickly, silently, Floralice turned away and sat down at the table.

"But nothing would tempt me to betray her to that man!" he added in a deep tone.

"She ought to be grateful to you."

She had used almost the same words before, but Hendrickson could see that it was with difficulty that she said anything at all. He had no wish to force an understanding, and was now sorry he had said so much; excitement had led him further than he ought to have gone. He remained standing unconsciously, waiting for Floralice to fully recover herself, but she had not stirred when a heavy step sounded outside and the door was unceremoniously opened.

And then Brown strode rudely in again, his face flushed and his manner excited.

"So you're still here!" he exclaimed.

"Where else should we be?" retorted Hendrickson. "This is the proper place for us. Can you say the same? Allow me to ask by what right you so unceremoniously invade a private house?"

"I ain't hyar ter discuss etiquette, but ter say that I have got onto ther truth at last. You two said you didn't know who the Hughes woman was. I do. Thar she is!"

He leveled one finger at Floralice. She had arisen and her face was very pale, but it was far calmer than was to be expected.

Edgar Hendrickson saw that the battle must be fought over again, but he rallied to the work.

"Are you mad?" he cried, feigning indignation, rather than anger. "I cannot believe you would willfully do any one harm, but do you know whom you accuse?"

"I accuse this woman."

"Deluded man, she is one of the most honorable women in this town."

"Can't help that; she's ther fire-bug. I ain't sure you are any better, for you defended her—lied ter me about her. You knew who she was, an' you beat me out o' doin' my duty."

"You speak falsely, and if we were alone you should answer for it as man to man. I care little for the slur on myself, but no true man will insult a woman. No man shall in my presence. You have made a base charge against a lady, and your manhood should revolt at it."

"Fine talk, but you can't wheedle me again."

"Nobody wishes to do so."

"I say she is the Hughes woman."

"Persist in this assertion, and you stand a good chance of being chastised."

"I'll risk that. I am hyar on duty, an' I'm goin' ter do it. You two fooled me afore; you can't do it ag'in. Ma'am, you're my prisoner!"

He advanced toward Floralice, but Hendrickson barred the way. The young man's face was almost as pale as hers, but it was not fear that moved him.

"Attempt to touch her and I will knock you down," he declared.

"Don't ye dare interfere with ther discharge o' my duty."

"Don't you dare molest this lady!"

The men glared angrily at each other, but Floralice now moved forward. Her calmness surprised Hendrickson. The first shock of her fear was over, and all her magnificent courage had come to her aid.

"Really, gentlemen, you are quarreling about nothing," she said. "Why will men be so headstrong? I feel sure that Mr. Brown's case will not spoil with a little delay, so let us all sit down and talk this matter over. You don't object, do you, Mr. Brown?"

He hesitated, wavered, and then answered:

"I don't s'pose, it'll do any great harm, though my team is waitin' ter take me back ter Oaktree. I'll hear what you hev ter say."

And he sat down like a tamed grizzly.

"First of all," Floralice calmly, pleasantly continued, "I believe that you said when you called before that you had been told you could rely on Mr. Hendrickson; that he was just the man to aid you; and that he was strongly recommended by the chief of police of your city?"

"Yes."

"Well, I leave it to him to say who and what I am."

"But—"

Brown hesitated, and Floralice pleasantly repeated:

"But?"

"A woman outside told me that you reely was her that I was after, an' that Hendrickson was lyin' for you."

Hendrickson started. He suspected the identity of this troublesome woman.

"Does this tally with what the chief of police said?"

"Wal, hardly," Brown admitted.

"Who was the woman?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know? How is that?"

"When I tried to find out, she run away."

Floralice laughed, and it seemed as careless and amused of inflection as her manner was at ease.

"Do you take the word of an unknown woman in preference to that of Mr. Hendrickson? He was recommended to you by the chief of police. Who is she? Who recommends her?"

Brown's face lengthened.

"Hang me ef I know!" he replied.

"Did she not prove her insincerity by running away?"

Mr. Brown scratched his head doubtfully. Floralice was making some strong points, but if the truth was known it was as much her manner as what she said that was influencing him.

"I don't know but I've made a fool o' myself," he said, dubiously, "but I must be sure I'm right afore I change my tune. Hendrickson, ther chief said you was a right square man. Do you asseverate that this hyar lady is incapable o' bein' a fire-bug?"

"Yes, sir; I do."

"Kin she prove an *alibi* fur ther night o' ther fire?"

"She can, by me and another good witness."

It was a bold assertion, for Brown might put it to the test, but Hendrickson had such strong hope of getting the man back to the Oaktree station at once that he went in to play the game recklessly.

"You're sure you saw her ther night o' ther fire?"

"I'll swear that I did!"

"Then what o' ther woman who p'izoned my mind?"

"She was undoubtedly a crazy woman of the village; one Bet Bridges, who is always indulging in queer pranks. You are not the first man for whom she has made trouble. Of course she is not 'crazy' in the true sense of the word—only very eccentric, a little deranged, and not accountable for what she does. She may be at home now, entirely forgetful of what she has done. Certainly no sane, honest woman would take so much trouble to urge you on and then run away. Was she calm, or excited?"

"Excited."

"It was Bet, I'm sure," declared Hendrickson, with a smile.

Brown hesitated a moment, and then repeated his former question:

"You say you will swear that you seen her ther night o' ther fire?—Miss Heath, I mean."

"I will swear to it."

The visitor was plainly on the point of giving up the game. There were certain things which were not satisfactory, and he might think of more at a future time, but was he to go contrary to what the chief of police had said? Was he to accuse the very man who had been recommended to help him? Not by any means. It was mad, absurd.

He was about to announce his ultimatum when a knock sounded at the door. Hendrickson was nearest and he proceeded to open it, but as it swung partly back he stood dumfounded and dismayed.

The applicant was Leah Lee!

He had before been positive as to the author of all this trouble, but this added conviction. Yes, the Gypsy girl was there, her eyes gleaming with excitement and intense longing to annihilate her rival. She had discarded the veil worn when talking outside with Brown, but this was a bad sign; it indicated that she had resolved to appear openly and bear witness against Floralice.

For a moment Hendrickson was almost overwhelmed, but all his audacity came to his aid.

He turned toward Floralice and Brown, and quietly said:

"It is some one to see me. Excuse me a moment!"

And then he pushed through the narrow space, one moment ahead of Leah's effort to enter, and closed the door behind him. Then he caught the Gypsy girl's wrist fiercely.

"Why are you here?" he demanded, sibilantly.

"To unmask that infamous woman!" Leah retorted.

"You shall not do it."

"I will and shall!"

"You will make the attempt at your peril. So you wrote for a man to come here!"

"I did. Even what you saw at the asylum did not shatter the glamour that wretched woman has thrown upon you, and I took another step. This one will succeed. I will denounce her. Let me pass, sir!"

She tried to wrest her hand away, but he held it tightly.

"I will not!" he declared, "and don't you dare give any alarm. You must leave the house at once. You wrote that I could name the woman who fired the asylum. Very well, if you persist in your purpose I will swear that you did the deed. Now take your choice between leaving here, or instant arrest for arson. Which shall it be?"

CHAPTER XXII.

PRAY'S DETECTIVE ARRIVES.

LEAH'S eyes flashed venomously.

"Release my hand!" she hissed, trying to free herself.

"Not until you give me an answer," Hendrickson inexorably replied. "The question is: Will you go away and attend strictly to your own affairs, or shall I denounce you as the person who fired the asylum?"

"You will not be believed."

"The man Brown has been informed that I can name the fire-fiend. I shall name you!"

Leah's expression suddenly changed, and her mouth quivered as though she was about to burst into tears.

"Are you so madly infatuated with that woman?" she asked, huskily.

"You have no reason to suppose that, but you know as well as I do that she did not fire the asylum. I will not see her seized and taken away on a false charge. Come! let us have some fairness and decency in this case. Will you go away and interfere no more?"

"I will, if you will swear to never visit Floralice Heath again."

"I decline."

"Then I shall see the officer and expose her."

"Do so if you dare. If you appear to him with your lies I will declare you to be the fire-fiend. It is for you to choose. Go in, if you will!"

It was the supreme test, and he stepped aside and folded his arms. His gaze met hers sternly. She gazed at him as though fascinated. Her eyes had a wild, startled gleam, and her bosom heaved as though the sobs which her stern nature kept back were there at war and seeking freedom.

The venomous part of her nature was as strong as ever against Floralice, and she might have defied Hendrickson's threat had it not been for one thing. She felt that to defy him would be forever to lose his love, and that was the thing of all things she most coveted.

Suddenly the brightness of her eyes was dimmed with tears.

"You are cruel to me," she said, in the same husky voice; "cruel as the grave!"

"I am only just."

"You think only of her—always of her, and I have shown you how vile she is. I am only the dirt under your feet!"

"Leah, you have no occasion to feel thus. It is not for me to judge her or you, except that I see the injustice of your charge against her. You claim to care for me. Prove it by giving up your plot against a sister woman."

Her gaze fell to the floor, and for a moment she was silent. Then she suddenly looked at him again.

"I will do as you say. I will go away and let this plot fail; but I expect my reward. As you deal with me in the future, so will I deal with you!"

There was something very significant in her manner, as well as in the words, but Hendrickson was given no chance for reply. At the last word the girl almost darted out of the house. One moment her steps sounded, and then she was really gone.

Hendrickson drew a deep breath.

"One danger vanquished," he thought; "but others are looming up in the near future. I am afraid there will be serious trouble with that woman."

And then he returned to the other room. One glance showed him that all was well there. Floralice had completed her conquest during the intermission, and she and Brown were talking pleasantly over minor matters. The visitor arose as Hendrickson entered.

"Wal, I'm off. I've apolergized ter Miss Heath, an' now I do ther same ter you. I'm a durned, obstinate mule, an' when I git back home I shall hire a man ter kick me. That's all I kin say, except that when I go it blind ag'in', I hope I won't come out on't without a few arms an' legs broke."

As he really seemed to feel very much ashamed, both young people declared that he was fully forgiven, and then Hendrickson saw him to his vehicle and started for Oaktree.

Floralice had asked that the young man come back to her, and he obeyed.

"I have had a narrow escape," she said.

"Rather, I should say."

"Words cannot express how grateful I am to you. Of course I am innocent of that absurd charge, but it would have given me unpleasant prominence if I had been arrested."

"Yes."

"Did you really think you saw me the night that the fire is said to have occurred?"

Slowly, hesitatingly, the question followed his

monosyllable, and Floralice looked at him searchingly. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I convinced Brown," he answered. "Let us be satisfied with that, and pursue the inquiry no further."

Again there was silence. Floralice still studied his face and seemed ill at ease. Undoubtedly she was asking herself what he knew, or suspected. Perhaps an explanation hovered on her lips, but it was not made.

"Once more," she finally said, "let me thank you warmly. If you are ever in trouble, may you find as stout and loyal a defender!"

She gave him her hand, and he understood that the interview was at an end. Yielding to a sudden impulse he raised that fair hand to his lips. And one minute later he was alone outside the house, and on his way back to his hotel.

But he walked like one in a dream, and his dream was of Floralice. There were dark clouds over the sky of his life, but among them shone a few stars whose radiance defied everything, and they seemed like the eyes of Floralice. And though calm judgment bade him beware and pause, still responded his heart, "Floralice!"—always Floralice!

Two days passed. The unwelcome visitor, Brown, had not again been seen, and, so far as Hendrickson was concerned, the same remark might almost have been applied to Leah Lee. Twice he had been to the hut of the Gypsy family to inquire for her, and at other times he had walked that way hoping to meet her, but all in vain. Dame Lee declared that she was away from home, and would give no tidings.

Once, only, Hendrickson saw her. He was among the Pyramids and saw two persons at a distance, conversing. They were Leah and Clarence Webber.

The detective argued ill from this. Clarence was a suitor for Floralice's hand. Had he and Leah combined to form a plot to turn matters to their liking? After that Hendrickson looked for her more sharply. She knew certain things connected with Floralice, and he was resolved to offer her a good sum to tell the truth.

But Leah kept out of sight, and he was left to fear that a blow might fall at any moment.

Near the end of the second day Buck Basin had a new sensation. The detective sent for by Ebenezer Pray made his appearance. His arrival was soon known to all the inhabitants, and they quickly gathered to see him. He, however, was not visible for over an hour.

During all that time he was closeted with Pray in a private room.

It was dark when he finally appeared to the public eye. He proved to be a man still on the bright side of thirty, and as impassive as a detective is popularly supposed to be. His complexion was dark, as were his hair and beard—the latter were *very* black—and he looked like a man who had left all human frailties and inclinations behind when he embraced the calling of a public man-hunter; at least, so said several of the villagers.

Hendrickson, one of the spectators, mentally differed with this verdict. He may have been mistaken, or his own professional career may have given him an insight into human nature beyond the average, but it was his opinion that though Mr. Bernard Boyne—such was his name—might be a sharp detective, he was not a trustworthy one.

He had a look which Hendrickson mentally termed "snakish," and seemed like one in ambush.

Boyne lighted a cigar and stood smoking stoically, indifferent to the curious glances upon him, but it had just become known that Brigadier Baldy had been sent for, as the spokesman of the party that believed in the theory of accident, when the Old Brigadier arrived and was soon closeted with Boyne and Pray.

The veteran went to the interview with extreme reluctance. He had an awe of detectives, and feared that this great member of the craft might pick the truth from him, but the lesson learned in the days of war was remembered now.

He had faced the guns of Gettysburg and Antietam boldly; he now faced Bernard Boyne boldly.

They were introduced in the private room by Pray.

"Mr. Boyne, this is Adam Benmarsh."

The detective started and dropped his cigar.

"Wh—what name?" he asked.

"Benmarsh; Adam Benmarsh. He is usually called Brigadier Baldy, however, and by that name I have before referred to him when speaking to you. What's the matter, Boyne? You don't look well."

Pray told the truth. Mr. Boyne did not look well. His dark face had grown suddenly pale, and it almost seemed that he was frightened about his condition. Certainly he had a startled look.

"It's a heart trouble," he explained, placing his hand over that organ. "I am subject to sharp pains here, and I had an unusually acute one then. Besides, I burned my fingers with that cursed cigar."

The latter had been dropped on the carpet, and Boyne picked it up and threw it in the

stove. He was very careful not to leave any spark that could possibly increase and injure the carpet, and spent considerable time in making sure on this point.

When he finally faced them again his heart trouble had probably abated, as he seemed quite himself.

He then began questioning the Old Brigadier. He had quite agreed with Pray that the village people as a body evidently desired to smother investigation in the Shaffer Knight case; that they had put Brigadier Baldy forward as spokesman to uphold a theory in which none of them believed; and had added the opinion that he could soon utterly tear the old man's case all to pieces and overwhelm him in the ruins of his falsehoods.

Ebenezer now expected to see him do it.

The Brigadier, too, looked for something of the kind and was on nettles. Very deep and crafty he expected to find this great limb of the law, and he had a weakening fear that the whole truth would soon be wrested from him.

Boyne began gently; very gently indeed. He said they had asked for Mr. Benmarsh to help them because he was one of the leading men of Buck Basin—in fact, the foremost man of the village—and they felt that his active co-operation would be of great value to them.

Pray could hardly avoid smiling at this.

"Taffy!" he thought, exultantly. "Boyne understands his business. He has baited the hook, and will soon haul the whole truth out of this simple old man. He's a lamb now, but when he begins to roar like a lion Benmarsh will go all to pieces."

Very much to Pray's surprise the detective did not "roar like a lion" at all. He kept the Brigadier there for half an hour, but, very much to Pray's dissatisfaction, treated him considerably all the time, laid no traps for him, and did not shake or strongly oppose the Brigadier's expressed theory of accident.

And when Boyne finally bowed the visitor out, Pray was so moved that he curtly exclaimed:

"Why, man, you have not progressed an inch. I thought you were going to handle that fellow without gloves."

"Ah! but I found him too deep," answered Boyne.

"Too deep! Why, he's as simple-minded as a child."

"You underrate him. I'm a great judge of character, and I tell you he is really keen and crafty. It is my opinion we had better deal with him as little as possible, and work on weaker men."

"Great Scott!" thought Pray, "this is amazing. It won't do to say it, but if the idea was not so absurd, I should actually believe that Boyne is afraid of the Old Brigadier!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

LIKE ONE FROM THE GRAVE.

BRIGADIER BALDY was besieged by the men of the village when he went outside. What had been said to him by the detective? He had no thrilling news to communicate. Even to him the interview had seemed very quiet and commonplace. The detective had listened attentively to him, had not tried to any extent to tear his theory to pieces, and had seemed like a very honest kind of a man.

Buck Basin rejoiced, but took a view of the matter which had not occurred to the Brigadier—the detective, being a decent and sensible man, had perceived the high honor and good judgment of their spokesman, and had been strongly impressed in his favor.

One and all declared that it was a wise choice which had made the Brigadier their leader and their bulwark.

But he, walking homeward, was not so sanguine. He felt like anything but a bulwark; his burden was stronger than he could well bear. What would his honest friends say if they knew that he was the one man who could have thrown light on Shaffer Knight's fate?—what would they say if the whole terrible truth ever became known?

"A bulwark!" he thought, hopelessly. "I am anything less; I am only a weak, guilty old man, and deserve as little credit as does a small cloud at night for preventing the shining of the sun."

He reached his house and entered.

Mrs. Benmarsh and her son were alone in the living room, and the virago was loudly expressing her views on some subject which had aroused her temper. Clarence was silent—he had been strangely silent of late—but as long as he would listen his mother would gladly talk.

It was a scene far from agreeable to the Old Brigadier, and he went slowly up-stairs. He ascended very moderately, for his old wound and his secret made him anything but agile.

His secret!

His brain seemed to burn with the weight upon it. He was in dire trouble, and there was none in whom he could confide. He felt inexpressibly lonely, and it was not strange that his thoughts went back to a time when love and peace reigned at his fireside—the old days before trouble and desolation came.

At the top of the stairs he paused and leaned heavily upon the balustrade.

"Alone in my old age!" he thought, sadly. "Ah! if my boy had not disappeared, this would not have been so. Poor Hugh! I will never believe he did intentional wrong, but—well, I will bear my cross as well as I can, but it would be happiness beyond expression if I had his strong arms to help me. I believe I could find courage to tell him all."

Slowly he entered his own room. He knew where to find the lamp and matches, and he moved toward them. It was only the touch of a match and replacing of the chimney, and then the light flared upon his narrow line of white hair and his kindly face.

It fell on something else, but he did not suspect it. He remained gazing steadily at the flame. Some thought was in his mind, and he stood like a statue.

Suddenly the silence was broken, and broken by a deep, hoarse voice.

"Father!"

The Old Brigadier started. The half-consumed match dropped from his hand. Had he heard aright? That voice! Those words! Neither was in place in his poor room, in which no foot but his had been set for months. He was confused, uncertain, startled. Yet, he turned slowly.

Turned and saw standing before him a man who was still young—he did not look to be over thirty, and might be much younger—but whose muscular form was clad in miserable rags, and whose hair and beard were in confusion. He might have been a tramp, so far as neatness was concerned, and he certainly looked most wretched and forsaken of man, but he put out his hands slowly, humbly, and added:

"Father, don't you know me?"

The Old Brigadier was leaning heavily against the table, and his face was working convulsively, but at these words he opened his arms widely, and the ragged intruder was folded to his heart.

Strong and earnest was that embrace, but for a moment no more was said. It was Brigadier Baldy who first broke the silence.

"My boy—my boy!" he murmured, in a trembling, husky voice.

"My faithful father!" answered the younger man, and tears fell profusely on the Old Brigadier's shoulder—tears which sprang from the intruder's heart and fell from his eyes.

There was no complete sentence spoken for several moments, but again and again the elder man repeated:

"My boy! my boy!"

The words came from his very heart, and were fraught with joy and thanksgiving. He was not one to give way to loud expressions of emotion, but that heart was a well of tenderness and all its warmth was expressed in his voice.

Finally he released his hold, stepped a little back and looked the other in the face.

"I knew you would come back," he said, simply.

"And—and—you are not sorry?"

Slow and hesitating was the question, and the speaker seemed more humble and crushed than ever.

"Sorry!" echoed the Old Brigadier. "I thank Heaven that it is so. How can you doubt it, Hugh?"

"But your heart must revolt from me."

"Never! Are you not my son?"

"But—you remember how I went away."

"You are still my boy, and still I thank Heaven that I look upon you once more."

"But see how I have come! See my rags and—"

"I do not look at the clothes, but at the man, and though your face is bearded I once more see my son—my boy. Ay, it is Hugh, come back as I always felt he would come. Here, my boy, take this chair and sit near the light. Let me once more look closely at the face I watched from infancy to manhood, as it changed day by day. Sit by the light, my boy."

The ragged wanderer looked uneasy.

"But the door—it is not fastened."

"There is no way of fastening it."

"Some way must be found. Place the bed against it, for no one must see me."

The Brigadier's face suddenly grew grave.

"Do you still fear the consequences of that old affair?"

Hugh hesitated before replying.

"Yes," he finally said.

"The door shall be closed. This nail fitted over the latch, is as good as a lock. There, it is done, and you are now safe. But how did you come here? Do they know—down-stairs?"

"No, I came in secretly, like a thief. I dared allow no one to see me, and prudence tells me I must soon be going. I ought not to have stopped, for I might compromise you, but I felt that I must look once more on your face, and I was utterly wearied out. They have hunted me fast and far, as bloodhounds hunt their prey."

"Hunted you!" echoed the Brigadier, his face pale.

"Without remorse."

"For—for that old affair?"

"No, another. You may as well know the

worst. I am an escaped convict, and—they are on my track!"

He sat there with his ragged figure slouching down in the chair, and his manner hopeless and crushed, while the Old Brigadier looked ghastly.

"You—are—in—trouble—again?" he gasped, a long pause between every two words.

"Yes, but not through any fault of mine—believe me, not through my fault!" cried the younger man. "Oh! what evil fate is pursuing me, that I am always in trouble? I solemnly declare that I have never intentionally done wrong, yet I am hunted like a mad dog."

"You—have not been charged with any serious crime?"

"If you mean doing harm to a human being, I freely answer no. Thank Heaven, no one can say that, or does say it. I should die if they did; I could not bear to be called a murderer."

The Brigadier started.

"No, no; of course not."

"I would not care so much for myself, for I am accustomed to trouble," Hugh continued, humbly, "but it is for my wife and child. My heart is breaking for them. They are lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes, disappeared. It was when searching for them that I fell ill by the way and was seen by those prison officials, who knew me at once. They pursued me; drove me away from my loved ones."

This painful, hopeless recital was vague and incoherent, and the Old Brigadier saw that the speaker's mind was not just right. It might be affected by the load of trouble, but he suspected that fever was in his veins.

"Tell me all about it," he said, soothingly.

"Don't ask me to-night. Let me go to bed and rest, rest—that is what I need."

"Are your pursuers near?"

"I think not."

"When did you see them last?"

"I fled from them last night when they came upon my camp in the woods, but I do not think they saw me. They are not likely to come here to-night—but still they may, and I will not bring trouble upon you. I will go on!"

He started to his feet, but the Brigadier put out his hand and stopped him.

"Oh, no! you must not go."

"But I shall get you into trouble."

"I think there is no danger of that, and if you do, who could blame me? You are my son, and this is your proper refuge. Here you shall stay."

"But—the folks down-stairs."

The Brigadier's face became grave. True, what of them? He knew both Mrs. Benmarsh and Clarence well enough to be aware that they would take delight in delivering Hugh to the officers. They hated him, and even if they had not, they would have done it to spite the poor old Brigadier.

"They need not know you are here," he replied, after a pause. "Neither of them ever comes into this room, and I will find some way to feed you. You have come back to me like one from the grave, and my heart will not allow you to go from my sight again. Here you shall remain, and let any one molest you if he dares!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BEGINNING OF A DIFFICULT DECEPTION.

HAVING formed his plans the Brigadier went about preparations for Hugh's comfort and safety. He never had a suspicion that the young man was less innocent than he said. As a boy, the son had been truthful, and his father felt that he was so still.

No matter what shadows were on the young man's life, nor what charges were against him, he must be innocent.

Brigadier Baldy's room was a better refuge than any other place in the village. As has been said, even Mrs. Benmarsh and Clarence never came there; there was one good which was the result of the family estrangement. Unless officers of law came and made a rigid search, there was little fear that he would be discovered except by accident.

For a while the Brigadier was puzzled to know how he was to be fed, but he finally settled that point. Mrs. Benmarsh would miss any food taken away from her larder, but the old man knew that Edwina Conrad would furnish what was necessary and say nothing.

Hugh insisted that he must go on in the morning, so as to avoid any possibility of getting his father into trouble, but the Brigadier not only opposed this plan, but had grave doubts if he would be able to pursue his flight.

Some preparations were made for his comfort about the room, and then they sat down to talk again.

"Tell me about yourself," said Hugh. "You look exactly as you did years ago. Your health must be fair. Does your old wound trouble you very much?"

"Not particularly. There is some pain, but nothing serious," answered the father, who would not have confessed to anything serious then under any circumstances.

"I learned that people here call you 'Brigadier Baldy,' and I judged that it must be a name implying their love and respect for you."

"They are very kind to me."

"And there is no serious cloud on your life?"

It cost the Old Brigadier an effort to answer as he wished. He remembered that only a short time before he had been wishing that he had his son to confide in; to help bear his load of trouble; but now the son was come in such distress that the father would not add to his sorrow. Not for all the world would he reveal the facts of Shaffer Knight's death and acknowledge his crime.

An effort was necessary, but the old, peaceful smile overspread his genial face.

"I am as happy as I can be while you are in trouble," he answered. "My life here is quiet and peaceful, and the people, old and young, are my friends."

"I am glad you are happy; glad you have no care on your mind. You deserve peace and rest, and here in this little town sorrow ought never to come. I am very glad."

The Brigadier hastened to change the subject. He could not bear to have it run in such a channel. What would Hugh say if he knew that a detective was even then on the ground, tracing a mystery which might result in the branding of Brigadier Baldy as a murderer. Yes, he still used the word; he would substitute no lighter one. He had left Shaffer Knight to drown, and he would admit no farce of extenuating circumstances.

Hugh began to nod in his chair, despite all his efforts to keep awake, and the Brigadier insisted that they should retire. It was done, and Hugh was soon asleep.

He did not become conscious all night, but his slumber was not peaceful or restful. All through the hours of darkness he rolled and tossed on the bed, muttering constantly, and the burden of his trouble was the uncertainty surrounding his wife and child.

Of himself and the pursuit made by officers who would drag him to prison, he seemed to have scarcely a thought; he worried only about those whom he loved.

Brigadier Baldy slept but little, for his heart was too full. He, too, had almost forgotten his own troubles; he thought solely of those of his son. Hugh had come back, as he had long hoped he would, but not in the way he desired.

At any moment officers might descend upon him and drag him to prison.

It was a severe blow to the Old Brigadier's tender heart, but he bore up as well as possible, and, never doubting Hugh's innocence, tried to plan for his future.

In the morning even Hugh had to abandon all thoughts of resuming his flight. He was so weak that he could hardly leave the bed. The blood shot less rapidly through his veins, but to the fever had succeeded a relaxation of all his bodily and mental force.

Glad indeed was he to listen to the Brigadier's advice, and to consent to remain in the house. And so he kept the bed, looking pale and haggard, and not inclined to talk.

The great point now became to feed and care for him without arousing the suspicions of Mrs. Benmarsh or Clarence. They were the last persons in the world to be taken into confidence, and the secret must be kept from them.

Hugh declared that he wanted nothing to eat, but the Brigadier, after eating his own breakfast in the kitchen, left the house and went to that of Evan Conrad. He found Edwina alone. She was not looking so bright and cheerful as of old, but a smile came to her face as he appeared, and she welcomed him as usual.

Not much time did he lose before coming to the point.

"Edwina, I have known you a good while."

"Ever since I was a child, Brigadier."

"And we have been friends?"

"The best of friends."

"Edwina, suppose I should—a—ask you to do me a favor?"

"I only wish you would; I would do it gladly. I owe you gratitude for a hundred favors, for repeated kindness. Whatever I can do for you will be gladly done."

"You will be surprised at my request."

"I am not so sure of that. What is it?" asked the young wife, not a little surprised at his hesitation.

"I want you to make me some kind of broth, or soup, and a little toast."

Edwina was surprised, but the request did not seem mysterious. She believed that she understood it fully. The Brigadier's wife had always been noted for her vixenish disposition, and it now looked as though she had actually deprived him of the necessities of life.

"Of course I will make them," she hastened to say, "and you shall have something more substantial."

"Not this morning, Edwina."

"But such things as you mentioned will not long keep you from being hungry."

"Did you think they were for me?"

"Yes."

The Brigadier hesitated several moments before he said more. Then he slowly added:

"There is something about this matter which I can't tell any one, and I have a secret to keep. Some one must know a little, but not much."

Those in my own house I dare not trust at all, and would not if I could. Now, I shall want some food every day for awhile—I don't know how long. I must get it outside my house, and I am willing to pay for it, but the one who furnishes it must be as silent as the grave. No one must be confided in. Now, of all the people in Buck Basin, I know of no one I can trust like you. Are you willing to help me, and do it blindly?"

It was the most singular speech she had ever heard from Brigadier Baldy's lips, and it perplexed her a good deal, but not for a moment did she hesitate.

"Certainly I am," she answered.

"And do you think we can keep it a secret?"

"I think so."

"Will it make you too much trouble?"

"Oh! no; it will be no trouble at all, and I will gladly do it. I will begin at once."

And then she hurried cheerfully about and soon had a little repast prepared as the Brigadier requested. On this occasion he must necessarily carry it in a pail, and somewhat openly, but, afterward, he intended to use the cover of night as much as possible.

When he was gone Edwina gave her wonder full scope. What was the meaning of this curious incident? What could Brigadier Baldy want of the food? He had not appeared to be hungry, and had barely tasted of the food she asked him to try. Then why did he want to take this food away?

Clearly, it must be for some one else, but for whom?

She puzzled over this matter for some time, but without arriving at any conclusion. She could account for the fact in no way.

After awhile her mind turned to a subject which interested her even more. The Brigadier had noticed a change in her looks, and though she did not suspect that there was any, there was good reason for it.

Since Brian Markoe's visit she had been worrying incessantly. Every moment she expected to hear that Evan was arrested for the murder of Shaffer Knight. Her faith in his innocence never wavered, but she knew that Markoe had the will to make the charge and was liable to do so at any time.

It was this which made the little woman look less cheerful than of old.

She was brooding over it on this occasion when Evan returned. He, too, had been using his eyes, and though he could not mention a point where she had failed to do her duty, he was dissatisfied. He could not avoid mentioning it now.

"What is troubling you, Edwina?" he abruptly asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a start.

"You seem to be worrying about something. You, who used to be so light-hearted and gay, are now as sad and grave as a nun."

"Nonsense, Evan!" she retorted, lightly.

"I wish it were nonsense, but my eyes have been busy, and I cannot help seeing that something is troubling you. Before we were married you used to assert that you told me all your troubles. Why shouldn't you do so now?"

"I would if they were directly connected with us, but do you know I am afraid all this excitement about the agent will result in more exactions from the people of Buck Basin by Sinclair Rhodes."

Her excuse relieved Evan's mind apparently.

"If that is all, you need not worry; matters can't be much worse than at present. Forget all about it, my dear."

And then he tried to be gay, and Edwina did her part, but in spite of all her efforts the shadow would now and then return to her face.

She could not forget Brian Markoe, the secret he claimed to hold, and his threat.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

FLORALICE HEATH sat in the parlor where she passed the greater part of her time. She had been trying to read, but the book, though intensely interesting, had failed to hold her attention. She had laid it down and was thinking intently.

She was aroused by a knock at the door, and when she absently bade the applicant enter, Clarence Webber appeared. She arose quickly, but not because he was a welcome visitor. Far from it. He had been a persistent suitor for her hand, even after he had been decisively rejected, and his persistence had made him even more obnoxious than he would otherwise have been.

He knew that he was not welcome, and made a quick, deprecating gesture.

"Don't send me away," he said, almost humbly. "I want to talk with you."

"Be seated, then, and I will listen," she answered, as courteously as possible, and hoping he would not say anything unpleasant.

She had tried to tolerate him because he was an inmate of Brigadier Baldy's house, but it was difficult.

"I have come to say that I am going to leave Buck Basin," Clarence announced, turning his hat restlessly in his hands.

"Indeed!"

It was not an encouraging reply, for it indicated relief on her part.

"Yes; I have decided to go into business."

"That is a praiseworthy decision."

"I have a chance to go into a bank in St. Louis at a fair salary, with good prospects of advance."

"Better still. I congratulate you. Every young man ought to make a strong effort in business, and the sooner he starts, the sooner he will get established."

"Just my view," said Clarence, brightening.

"My ill health has been against me here, for I haven't the strength to work on land. Besides, there is no encouragement in Buck Basin. I have not worked here, and some persons have been down on me, but I am going to show them that I have the will and ability to succeed. I expect to be a rich man some day."

This seemed rather premature, but Floralice assured him that she hoped so.

"Do you, really?" he asked, quickly.

"I wish success to every honest endeavor."

"Of course I am honest, and I am going to fight the battle bravely. The only drawback is that I shall be wholly among strangers."

"You will soon make new acquaintances."

"But they will not be like the old. Now, I have been thinking that if I could have one true friend there, to cheer my hours of leisure and—and to share my prosperity, it would be very pleasant. I have decided to try for such a thing. Miss Heath, you have said that you did not care to link your fortune with mine, but I was without work and without prospects at that time. Now that all this is changed I have decided to give you another chance—that is, to ask you again. Floralice, will you be my wife and go with me to my new home?"

Rapidly he turned his hat, and even faster did he speak. He was nervous, though not from natural timidity; he expected another refusal, and in his excitement poured forth his proposal as though every moment was of vital importance.

But he read his fate in Floralice's face before she spoke.

"I am sorry to hear you say this," she gravely replied.

"Sorry?"

"Yes. We have before talked on this subject, and I have spoken so plainly that it ought to be settled."

"But my new prospects—"

He hesitated, and she finished the sentence:

"Are fortunate for you, but I cannot share them."

An angry gleam appeared in his eyes.

"You are determined to scorn me, ain't you?"

"I scorn no one, but, like every one else, must be allowed to manage my own affairs. Forgive me if I speak plainly, for I only want to make you see how useless it is to speak further on this subject."

"Then you positively decline?"

"I must."

He was silent for a moment, and then an ominous twinkle appeared in his eyes.

"Miss Heath, what would you say of an honest man who was willing to take for his wife a woman who had once figured as a criminal?"

"I should say he was very foolish."

"Does he deserve no credit for being so forgiving?"

"There is so much to be said in arguing this question that I don't think I will try."

"You ought to be interested."

"I? Why?"

"Because you are the woman to whom I allude. You carry your head high in Buck Basin, but there are those who know your record. I am one of them. A word from me would ruin you, but I prefer not to speak. I want to be your friend, not your enemy. Necessity, however, knows no law. Your beauty has maddened me, and I cannot bear refusal."

"You do seem to be mad," Floralice answered, with surprising calmness. "You talk wholly at random. How dare you make accusations against me?"

"There isn't much to dare. Perhaps you think I don't know your record. Perhaps you think I don't know the episode of the convict released from prison by you and thrown in the river, but the officers are still searching for you. A word from me and you will be arrested."

"You are talking nonsense," coolly, steadily replied Miss Heath. "I know nothing whatever about the matters you allude to, and I decline to hear more. You have insulted me by assuming that I am a criminal. This is the crowning offense of the series you have heaped upon me, and forgiveness, even endurance, is at an end. You will find the door at your right. Good-night, sir!"

She had arisen and was towering before him in queenly anger, imperious and beautiful as a heroine of feudal days, but the demon in his nature was aroused, and he did not stir.

"Not so fast, my disdainful sweetheart. If I go, I shall send an officer to arrest you."

"You can do so as soon as you choose, but you or I leave this room at once. Will you go?"

"No!"

"Then I shall."

She started toward the door, but he quickly arose and stepped before her.

"You don't go until you have promised to marry me!" he hissed.

Another moment and he was looking into the muzzle of a revolver, held by her unwavering hand.

"I command you to let me pass!" she exclaimed in a voice as inexorable as fate.

Webber's thin face grew colorless. He was not a brave man, and had always felt somewhat afraid of her, a woman of larger stature and stronger mind than he. Now he felt unspeakably small and weak, and he recoiled in alarm.

The way was clear, and in a moment more she had swept like a queen from the room.

The moment she was gone, his courage returned, and a curse fell from his lips. He was disgusted at his own cowardice, and felt like doing something desperate. He had a revolver, and he half-drew it, resolved to pursue and bring her to terms, but he was not all lost to the sense of caution, and he thought better of it. He was defeated, and the safest way was to make the best of a bad affair and get away at once.

He went, sullenly enough, and with revenge brooding in his heart. Once outside, he hesitated for a moment, and then, apparently coming to a conclusion, strode away in the darkness. He was soon beyond the village, and then a woman suddenly confronted him.

The quiet manner in which he received her showed that he was not surprised.

"You have failed!" she exclaimed, in a harsh, tense voice.

"How do you know?"

"Had she received you as a lover, you would not have been back so soon."

"You are no fool, Leah, and if it were not for her—"

"What did she say?"

"Scorned me, ordered me from the house, and drew a revolver to enforce her demands."

"Fool!" cried the Gypsy girl, "she will rush blindly to her fate. I have tried to save her, but she will not have it so. Well, there is yet one thing to try—the knife!"

"The knife?"

"Yes. She will find that I can strike hard and true; strike to her heart!"

"Hold on!" cried Webber. "By Jawge! I don't vote for any such deed as that; I didn't become your ally to have the woman I love cut down like a sheep. It would be fine for you to kill her and have Hendrickson all to yourself, but what of me? Where should I come in? Egad! I'm not going to have Floralice harmed."

"And have I helped you only to have you turn against me now?" cried Leah, angrily.

"Helped me! What have you done?"

"I showed you a way to win."

"Perhaps you will also convince Floralice," grimly suggested Clarence. "By Jawge! I wish you would, but it's out of the question. As to having her killed to satisfy your spite, I won't hear of it. But I've got a plan."

"What is it?"

"I want her abducted and shut up until her proud spirit quails. It can be done, if only the right means are used. Now, there is your mother and two brothers—what is to hinder their being her keepers?"

"What! at the shanty?"

"Of course not; she must be taken away somewhere, and I know of no better place than the Pyramids. Yonder hills show up small beside the Rockies, but I know from experience that there are many quiet places there where all your family and Floralice could stay and never be found."

Leah remained silent and thoughtful for a moment.

"Hendrickson would search for her," she finally answered.

"Write a note purporting to be from her, in which he would be informed that she had gone East."

"I'll do it!" Leah exclaimed. "Hagar Lee and the men obey my every word, and I'll speak to the point this time. Floralice shall be stolen and taken to the Pyramids, and Hendrickson will never see her again!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

SOMETHING ABOUT MR. BOYNE.

HUGH BENMARSH's first day under his father's roof passed quietly with him. No one suspected that the Brigadier had a man concealed there. The virago mistress of the place generally kept her voice audible in the style Hugh remembered so well of old, for even when alone she could not curb her fancy for scolding, but she did not intrude in the chamber.

She had once declared that "sixteen span of horses" could not drag her there, but the Brigadier took the precaution of quietly putting a lock on the door. The woman might change her mind.

Hugh kept the bed nearly all day, and experienced a blessed sense of relief at being there, even though he was continually worrying about his wife and child. He did not see fit to tell his story, and the Old Brigadier asked no questions.

He set the example of confidence, however, by

explaining the situation at the village in regard to Shaffer Knight's case, telling it from the public standpoint; and before he realized the fact he had admitted that the people considered themselves menaced as a whole, and had selected him as their spokesman, and the bulwark to repel the odium which Pray sought to cast upon the town.

Hugh declared that it was a wise choice, and he believed what he said.

The Brigadier found an active aid in Edwina, and though she had not the slightest idea for whom she was cooking, she prepared what he requested with a skill which did her great credit. She was glad to help her kind old friend, even though it was done blindly.

When night fell, the people asked themselves if Bernard Boyne, detective, had made any progress during the day. He had been over all the village and along the river, devoting several hours to an examination of the latter's banks.

It was known that he had picked up and saved a quantity of fallen leaves and twigs, and though they did not know what connection these had with the case, it was so like the work of great detectives that, taken in connection with the fact that Mr. Boyne liked to have other persons talk, but had little to say himself, it was agreed that he was a very sharp man, who would probably get at the whole truth.

Hugh Benmarsh slept better that night, and found himself stronger in the morning. When he had eaten breakfast he dressed fully in a suit of the Brigadier's garments, and moved about the room with more strength than was to be expected.

The Brigadier went out to show himself to the village people, so that his absence might not seem strange, and was gone two hours.

When he returned he gave the usual quiet signal at the door of the chamber, but had to repeat it several times before Hugh made any answer, and then he made sure of his father's identity before turning the key.

This unusual caution surprised the Brigadier, and he was more surprised when he entered, to see that Hugh's calmness had given place to great excitement. The young man quickly closed and secured the door.

"What is wrong?" Brigadier Baldy asked, with a sinking heart. "Have you been seen?"

"Not yet."

"Does any one suspect that you are here?"

"I believe so—I don't know. I saw him walk past the house and look this way."

"Who?"

"Sit down and I will tell you. I am too weak to stand."

Hugh dropped into a chair, and his father saw that some calamity had undone the gain in strength before perceptible. Heavy, indeed, was the Old Brigadier's heart.

The younger man leaned his head upon his hand, and remained for a moment in silence. Then he suddenly asked:

"Whom do you suppose I have seen?"

"I can't imagine."

"Edwards?"

"Edwards?"

"Yes, you remember him; you must remember. Edwards, the evil genius of my life, the man but for whom I should to-day be honored by all; the wretch who made me a fugitive and outcast on the face of the earth!"

He spoke vehemently, and the Brigadier gazed at him in startled surprise. It was plain that he understood, and that he was as much dismayed as Hugh. Twice he attempted to speak, however, before a word passed his dry lips.

"You saw him—here!" he finally exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"He passed the house, and, though he did not stop, looked the whole front of the place over carefully. He even glanced at yonder window, but I left only a narrow opening for observation and do not think he saw me. He is in Buck Basin, and must know I am here."

"Are you sure it was he?"

"Yes. He has changed greatly, but I knew him at once."

"Can it be he is one of our people?"

"More likely he is hunting for me."

"But he would not dare."

"True; he would be more inclined to avoid me. Ha! I did not think of that. He must be seized and made known to the police. Do you know him? He is a medium-sized man, with black hair and beard."

"That would apply to several of our men."

"He's no tiller of the soil. He has too fair hands and face for that; he must be leading a gentleman's life."

The Brigadier shook his head.

"That don't apply to any one here that I can think of."

"One thing more. I noticed that he wore a shirt with a white ground, upon which narrow brown stripes crossed so as to form squares or diamonds."

The Brigadier suddenly raised his head.

"What's that?" he cried.

Hugh repeated the description.

"Why, there's only one man here who answers to that, and he is Bernard Boyne, the detective engaged by Pray. It was surely he that

you saw, but—you must be wrong about his being Edwards."

"Do you suppose I could forget that face? Never! So he is a detective now? Ha! what is he here for, if not to hunt me down?"

He was growing very much excited, but Brigadier Baldy saw that he must act his usual part of comforter, so he forced himself to be calm, and earnestly replied:

"That is impossible, my boy. He came here several days in advance of you, and, besides, do you suppose he would dare arrest, or molest you? Certainly not; he has more reason to fear and flee from you."

"True, true; I forgot again. My head does not seem capable of reasoning. He is here; that much is certain. Now, if it were not for later affairs, I could have him seized for that old crime, but I dare not put myself before the public. Continued ill-luck has followed me, and it is my destiny to skulk like a wolf all my life."

Brigadier Baldy did not answer.

He knew that the latest discovery was an important one.

It had just occurred to him that Boyne acted very peculiarly when they were introduced, and he now found an explanation of it. Boyne really was Edwards, and the Old Brigadier's familiar, yet peculiar name had struck a chord of memory.

He was startled, and his talk about heart disease amounted to nothing; it was merely a cover for his agitation.

It was a peculiar chance which had brought these two old associates to the same town after a lapse of time measured by years, but the Brigadier could see no danger in the situation. On the contrary, he had a vague hope that good might come of it. Carefully he went over the whole ground for Hugh's benefit, and his logical presentation of the case caused the young man's face to grow brighter. Where he had been desponding, he now grew hopeful.

The Brigadier remained with him until noon, and then went to dinner. Clarence was not at the table, but his mother was, and she soon proved that she had something to say.

"Benmarsh," she abruptly observed, "my Clarence wants to go into business."

"Does he?"

"Yes, and I want you to give him a couple hundred dollars to do so."

"You ought to be aware that we have not one-tenth part of that sum."

"Borrow, then."

"I do not know who would loan; besides, it is definitely understood that I give Clarence no money. I board him; that is all I can do."

Mrs. Benmarsh laid down her knife and fork, and her thin face assumed a strained look.

"Am I to understand, Benmarsh, that you refuse to give my Clarence the paltry sum of two hundred dollars?"

"I said we had not any such sum," mildly replied the Brigadier.

"Benmarsh, in one word, will you give the money or not?"

"I cannot, and—"

"That settles it! You deny my Clarence the necessities of life, and the pittance which he would soon be able to turn and swell to an enormous amount. This is because he is *my* son. Perhaps, sir, you have forgotten the fortune you lavished to put *your* son through college, and how he rewarded you by committing forgery and—"

The Old Brigadier suddenly raised one hand.

"Stop!" he said, in a deep voice.

"Oh! it is very well for you to act the tyrant. So I am not to mention *your* son—"

"Do I ever criticize Clarence?"

"How can you? He is too gentle, kind and lovable to be spoken of except with admiration—a model young man, Benmarsh, I'd have you understand. But when he commits a forgery and has to run from the police you may criticize him and—"

Brigadier Baldy did not hear the rest. He had arisen from the table and gone hurriedly from the house, but for half an hour Mrs. Benmarsh discoursed in the same strain, using his name as though he had been there, and saying every bitter thing that occurred to her.

In the mean time the Brigadier had gone his way as peacefully as ever. Scenes like that were common in his house and he scarcely gave it additional thought, little suspecting the true reason why Clarence wanted the money, or what would come of his refusal.

Before he reached the center of the village he was joined by Game Chicken.

"I say, general," abruptly began the reformed pugilist, "kin you tell me whar Ed Hendrickson is?"

"I have not seen him."

"Mighty curious whar he is, but it's jest his way. He's a great chapter be prowlin' around. Ef he was ez homely ez I be, he'd be set down ez a burglarious biped, or somethin' o' that sort. Ez 'tis, we charitably s'pose he's a botanizer or geologizer."

"Do you want to see him particularly?"

"I do, that."

The ex-pugilist took off his hat and scratched his head slowly.

"Thar's somethin' I can't understand."

"Indeed?"

"Yas. I may be wrong, but I'm afeard a sartain damsel o' this burg has got inter trouble. Now, thar's a letter lying on Hendrickson's table, an' I opine it's from her, an' it *may* explain all straight—but o' course you don't understand."

"No, I do not."

Game Chicken again scratched his head. He rather hoped the Brigadier would question him, but as it was not done he abruptly asked:

"You know Floralice Heath?"

"Certainly."

"Do you s'pose thar is a reptyle in this town mean enough ter steal her?"

"I should certainly hope not. Do you mean to imply that such is the case?" anxiously asked the Brigadier.

Instead of answering, the eccentric pugilist dashed away like a sprint-runner, and the Brigadier saw Hendrickson advancing.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COLLECTING CLEWS.

GAME CHICKEN did not pause in his headlong course until he met Hendrickson, who had viewed his advance with a philosophy born of a knowledge of the man's ways. But the ex-pugilist broke out explosively:

"I say, commodore, there's a letter waitin' for ye on yer boodlewor table that you want ter read right away. I smell smoke."

"Hello, Ben, what's the trouble?"

"Don't know, but I'll say ter ye in confurence, read that letter immediate."

"How do you know that I have one?"

"Went in ter see ye; not at home; letter thar. Go an' read it. I'm mum till yer do."

Hendrickson smiled, for though Game Chicken seemed excited this did not awaken any fears on his part. The tender-hearted pugilist was stirred violently by small affairs. Accompanied by him the young man went to the hotel and to his room, and there was the letter. It was addressed in a lady's writing, and he opened it at once.

He read as follows:

"MR. HENDRICKSON:—It may not be a very polite way of taking leave of a friend, but I have decided to bid a long, if not eternal, farewell to Buck Basin, and it is my foible to go quietly and avoid all the sham of formal good byes. Business calls me to another State, and as it is quite likely that we may never meet again, I take this opportunity of saying that I am grateful to you for brightening my otherwise dull hours at this little town. Our acquaintance has been pleasant, and I shall remember you kindly. Please accept my good wishes for the future, and believe me your friend,

"FLORALICE HEATH."

Hendrickson crushed the letter in his hand.

"Hello!" quoth Game Chicken, "what is the uproar now?"

"Excuse me, but this is a private letter," Hendrickson answered, annoyed by such a bluff interruption at that time.

"Certain; to be sure. Don't go fur ter s'pose I'd lip in fur any common reason, but I've got a bee in my bunnit an' it's probin' my vitals. I smell smoke. Allow me ter interrogate a few. Do that epistle propert ter be from Miss Floralice Heath? Ef so, are it combatable wi' ther doctrine o' common sense?"

"This note," replied the young man, "informs me that Miss Heath has abruptly left Buck Basin."

"Over her own signature?"

"Certainly."

"Do you believe it?"

"Believe she has gone?"

"Do ye b'lieve she writ ther note?"

Hendrickson started and looked keenly at his companion.

"Have you reason to doubt it, Ben?"

"Wal, es I hev afore observed, I smell smoke, an' this is how she rises: Some period ago I was mearderin' through the bushes at ther foot o' ther Pyramids, when I see'd them two Lee heelers, Kit an' Nat, skulkin' in ambush like Injuns waitin' fur prey. Sez I ter myself, sez I, 'What are they at? Looks ez though they was a-layin' fur somethin'.' O' course I knew it might be common game, but I had sech a wounded poor opinion o' them that I feared they was up ter mischief."

"Well, go on—go on!"

"Wal, I sorter lingered, but then thinks I, this is foolish, for they had lived some time at Buck Basin, an' been law-abidin' citizens ez fur ez I knew. So I went on my way. Keepin' in ther trees ez aforesaid, I went about one-quarter o' a mile, an' then turned ter ther left to come back ter town. Ez I broke cover, w'at d'ye s'pose I saw?"

"Floralice Heath was jest enterin' ther bushes at ther p'int whar I see'd them Gypsies in ambush. Now, pard, I didn't like ther looks o' that, fur I knew she was not goin' ter good comp'ny."

"You should have hastened to her aid at once," broke in Hendrickson, who had grown excited.

"I did go that way right off, though not in any great haste; I didn't want ter lip in whar I had no call. Them Lees are no chicks, an' ef they was ter climb me with six or eight six-

shooters, all ther Marquis o' Queensberry science in ther world wouldn't 'a' saved me."

"Go on. What did you see?"

"Nothin'. When I got thar, thar wasn't a blessed sign o' ther girl or ther Lees."

"No?"

"Nary sign."

"Did you search thoroughly?"

"I did, an' even went so fur ez ter jog over ter ther Lee shanty an' apply fur admission. That was all I did; I didn't go in. Ther door was locked, an' not a sign could I see o' ther Gyps. I took another turn in ther timber, an' failin' ter raise a sign, concluded ter call on you an' tell ther story. You was not in, but that thar letter was, an' I felt mighty curious ter know what was in it."

"How long ago was it that you saw Floralice?"

"Not over an hour an' a half."

"This letter would lead me to suppose she had left town. I believe it is a forgery, and that she has fallen into the hands of enemies. Follow me!"

And Hendrickson strode from the room, followed by the ever-ready Game Chicken.

The young man believed that he saw the hand of Leah Lee in this. Probably she had forged the letter he had just read, while by some trick Floralice had been decoyed into the hands of the dusky people. Only for Game Chicken's chance discovery the scheme might have worked well, but as it was, it had collapsed at the very start, so far as deceiving him was concerned.

But Floralice? Where was she?

Hendrickson ground his teeth and strode toward the Pyramids in a ferocious mood. He knew that Leah had the will to do almost any dark deed, and if her brothers had been called to her aid she had the means.

To what extent Leah would carry her desire for revenge remained to be seen.

It was not a long walk to the foot of the Pyramids, and the two men soon reached the dusky people's shanty. It had a deserted air at first glance, and when they reached the door they found it locked, as Game Chicken had said. Repeated knocking brought no response.

The ex-pugilist grew excited, and suddenly, without taking advice of Hendrickson, he raised a large stone and hurled it against the door.

It flew open promptly.

The interior of the shanty was revealed, and told its own story at a glance. It was even more barren than usual, and what few articles remained were in confusion.

Hendrickson strode inside, and found his first impressions confirmed. The place was deserted. Everything indicated a more or less hasty departure, and this was especially significant; it looked as though Floralice had been captured—or worse—and the whole gang had then abruptly vacated the shanty.

"Lead me to where you saw the Lees in ambush," suddenly directed the young man.

Game Chicken obeyed. They went almost in silence, for a common fear was in their minds. Was it merely a case of abduction, or had a dark tragedy been enacted in the shadow of the timber?

The ex-pugilist managed to locate the place of ambush definitely. There was evidence that the men had waited there some little time. The grass was beaten down, and several twigs had been broken from the adjoining bushes. Here was the Gypsies lair; but where had the attack been made on Floralice—if one had been made?

The men searched carefully, but without result. Neither was a trailer, and they could find no sign. They made a search through the lower part of the Pyramids, but without result.

Then they started back to the village in anything but a happy state of mind. Both were sure Floralice had been abducted by the Lees, and though proof was lacking, they felt that something ought to be done at once. But how were the people to be made to see the necessity of it, unless Leah's enmity was explained?

This was the question that troubled Hendrickson, and he determined to make the search a private one.

He would engage two or three men, among them a good trail follower, and use every effort to find Floralice. If she was to be kept prisoner it seemed very probable that some place in the heart of the Pyramids would be used as a prison.

There was no other suitable place near, for only there was the prevailing prairie interrupted.

So Hendrickson and Game Chicken returned to the village, secured an old Indian-fighter as a trailer, and with another man to make up a quartette, set off among the mountain hills.

Unknown to them, a very interesting scene was at that time taking place in the room at the hotel devoted to the use of Bernard Boyne. Whether he was a great detective or not, he had common sense, and it occurred to him that there ought to be some evidence at Shaffer Knight's regular quarters to show why he had taken the journey to Buck Basin.

Accordingly, one of his first steps was to write and direct that any stray letters there be thoroughly examined, and that Knight's associates

be questioned to see if he had made any explanations before his departure.

This investigation was made by a local officer, and out of the chaff he obtained was brought one item which soon assumed great importance in Boyne's eyes. Knight had been a moody, unsocial, uncommunicative man, but he had necessarily had some acquaintances. One of them reported the following:

The day before the agent's fatal journey he and the witness had been sitting in unimportant conversation when a letter was brought to Knight. He had read it with manifest signs of annoyance, and then angrily said:

"Off again on the road. These infernal tenants need to be lashed all the time like an unruly ox to keep them in the furrow. Here's a man in Buck Basin who has been trying to swindle Sinclair Rhodes, and now he is going to be married and run away with the proceeds of his harvest, leaving Rhodes money out."

The witness asked one or two questions, but Knight seemed to have repented of this unusual flow of confidence, and he gave absolutely no more information.

This was all that the corresponding officer had to tell, but it was very important to Pray and Boyne. The former's eyes brightened.

"Ha! do you remember what I told you about the note thrown into my chamber?" he asked.

"That which asked you if you had noted the fact that Knight was killed on the same evening of Evan Conrad's marriage? Exactly. Significant, isn't it?"

"I should say so, rather."

"Looks very much as though Knight came here on purpose to see Conrad."

"And that Conrad killed him."

"Yes, though that don't follow necessarily. If Conrad was the murderer, why hasn't he got away from here, knowing, as he did, that there was danger of the object of Knight's visit becoming known? Also, and this is more to the point, if he had done anything crooked and intended to flee before his marriage, why hasn't he gone? Even if Knight was dead, some other agent would discover the crookedness. But it is not our place to defend Conrad. We must get to work and see if we have grounds upon which to accuse him."

"If we want to know whether he killed Knight, we must first trace his movements that evening. According to our theory your late partner must have reached the vicinity of Buck Basin before the hour set for the wedding. The great question now becomes, can Conrad prove an alibi for the early hours of the evening? We will at once examine witnesses to determine that point."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SPINNING THE WEB.

BOYNE now felt the need of some strategy, and he looked about for the best means of getting the information he wanted. The people seemed disposed to go in a body, and, thus far, he had discovered no petty spite of which he could take advantage to gather news prejudicial to Evan Conrad.

Knowing of no villain, he looked about for a fool, well knowing that these two classes divide the mischief done in the world between them.

He soon lit upon the proper man. This was a young fellow named Hardy; a person who would not have willingly harmed any one, but who had so thick a head that he was quite as dangerous.

He was escorted to a room under a very plausible pretext. Mr. Boyne wished to draw a map of the village and vicinity. Could Mr. Hardy, who knew the locality so well, help him to make it accurate? Mr. Hardy felt flattered and thought he could, and the work began.

The detective allowed his fish plenty of line before beginning work, and the map was half drawn before the campaign opened. Then Boyne prepared for action.

"A tree goes down here, don't it, Mr. Hardy? I thought so. By the way, are you a married man? No? Why, I should suppose the girls would have scooped in such a good-looking fellow long ago. You ought to pattern from your friend Conrad. Does the river bow as much as that at this point? Exactly; all right. Conrad is a hap y man; why shouldn't you be? Afraid of the girls? Nonsense! you don't look it. Take example from Conrad."

"His courage nearly give out."

"No! Did it?"

"I b'lieve so," said Hardy, with a wise nod. "He was late that ev'nin'—jest think on't! Late at his own weddin'. He said he had been walkin' by the river to take his last bachelor smoke, but I don't b'lieve it. I think he nigh about backed out."

"By George! you may be right. It's not likely a man would forget a bride for a pipe."

"Just my idea."

It was not his idea, but he thought he had advanced a brilliant point to turn banter away from himself.

"The mere fact that he went down to the river to smoke shows that he was nervous and wanted to be alone."

"So I think."

"Do you suppose he really did go there—down by the river, I mean?"

"He said so."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Ah! and he was late at the wedding. How late?"

"Oh! only fifteen minutes or so."

"Was he still nervous when he came in—excited?"

"Yes, he was."

"What a bashful fellow! Does Smith's house go down here? I thought so. I don't suppose Conrad was so afraid that he was pale, was he?"

"I thought he did look a good bit white."

"And excited?"

"Yes."

"He took his walk by the river all alone, didn't he?"

"So he said."

"It is singular," said Boyne, leaning back in his chair and speaking very slowly, "that during this walk he did not see anything of the man who was murdered there at just about that hour!"

Hardy's face flushed. He might be thick-headed, but this cool, significant speech, coming directly after the conversation already had, could not but suggest to him that he had made a grave blunder. He wished Evan Conrad well, and was startled by the idea that he had unwittingly made statements which might bring suspicion upon him.

He promptly tried to undo the mischief, and Mr. Boyne was apparently kind enough to help him. When convinced that he had learned all that Hardy could tell he discreetly smoothed the matter over and suggested that none of them mention the possibility which their idle remarks called up—it might annoy Conrad.

Then Hardy breathed freer, agreed to the suggestion and the map-making went on. When it was finished he was dismissed with polite thanks, and Pray shook hands with the detective showing an exuberance quite unusual to his melancholy nature.

"By the Old Nick! we are on the track!" he declared.

"Think so?"

"Of course I do. Don't you?"

"I think," coolly answered Boyne, "that we have begun the spinning of a web which will bring Evan Conrad to the gallows. Knight came to Buck Basin on a mission deeply hostile and dangerous to Conrad, and was murdered at a certain hour near the Arrow River. At that very time Conrad, by his own confession, was walking there. He was the only man who had a distinct motive for killing Knight. The inference is plain."

"Clear as day. Shall you arrest him at once?"

"No. I have obtained one clew where we thought none existed. I shall look for others before seizing, or alarming, him."

And the astute detective continued his work without any one suspecting what a storm was brewing. But new clews did not seem to appear and after supper he announced to Pray that they would call upon Conrad boldly. After reaching there they would be governed by circumstances, and unless a very good chance was offered nothing must be done to alarm him.

They went to the house accordingly.

A light was burning in the living room, and Boyne applied his knuckles to the door. Silence followed the knock, and there seemed to be an unaccountable delay about opening the door, as Boyne concluded when he rapped for the third time.

Just at that moment Pray, who stood somewhat back of his leader, exclaimed in a low voice:

"Somebody has just left the house by the rear door."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Can Conrad have seen us and taken to his heels?"

"Somebody is making unusually good time. He skurries away in the darkness like a frightened rabbit. If it ain't Conrad, we have stumbled upon another mystery, and it is—"

"Hush! I hear footsteps."

In a moment more the door was opened, and Edwina stood before them. Boyne's sharp eyes discovered at first glance that she was agitated, and as she saw them an expression swept to her face which was plainly one of alarm. He felt triumphant already; unless she had a guilty secret, he argued, she would not be frightened by such a visit.

But he bowed and smiled in his blandest manner.

"Good-evening, madam. Is Mr. Conrad in?"

"I—I think not. He may be in his room," faltered Edwina, trying in vain to control her voice.

"Will you kindly see? If he is, we would like to talk with him for a few moments."

Edwina felt as much at ease in the presence of the dark detective as though he had been a rattlesnake, but there was no way to avoid him. He had stepped coolly over the threshold as he spoke, and she could do no more than to give him and Pray seats. Then she went up-stairs in search of Evan.

Boyne favored Pray with a wink, and then they waited decorously. She soon returned and announced that her husband was not in.

"That's bad. Have you any idea when he will return?"

"No, sir."

"We wanted to see him about the Shaffer Knight murder."

Edwina's heart sunk. Had Brian Markoe kept his threat and told the lie that would be likely to ruin Evan? She feared it was so, and knew that she must look strangely pale and frightened. But she could not help it. All her powers of self-control seemed to have been lost, and she could only falter one word:

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Very sad affair, Mrs. Conrad."

"Yes, sir."

"We expect to have the murderer under arrest soon."

"I hope you will!"

She meant what she said in one sense. She would not believe Evan guilty, and it occurred to her that if the real assassin was found, her husband would then be in no further danger. Her very lack of control made the words harder than might have been expected, more automatic; but Boyne misconstrued the inflection.

"She is recovering her courage," he thought. "No use of talking further to her."

Then he added, aloud:

"We have found Mr. Conrad of great use to us in our investigation, for he has a clear head. He and the other leading men of the place have showed proper spirit in the affair. Well, as it's uncertain when he will return, we will not wait for him. Please ask him to step over to the hotel in the morning."

And then they left the house. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Boyne quietly took his companion's arm and led him around to the rear. He wished to see if there was any trace of the man who had so hurriedly left upon their arrival. They soon made a discovery.

There was no door at the point where he had emerged; nothing but a window. The inference was plain; it was by means of this that he had made his exit. Plainly, they had run upon some mystery. The man had been so anxious to avoid being seen by them, that he had taken this way of departure, which no one would do in an ordinary case.

"It must have been Conrad," said Pray.

"Looks like it."

"Furthermore, it shows conclusively that he knows he is suspected. He ought to be arrested at once, so that he can't run away from us."

Boyne did not answer, but walked on in a thoughtful mood, trying to decide what to do.

At that moment Edwina was cowering in a chair like a frightened fawn.

"He is suspected; I feel sure he is. They will arrest him, and then— Oh! what shall I do?— what shall I do? They will swear his life away, and I—but I pray that I may die before then!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NIGHT WANDERER.

BRIGADIER BALDY bore up bravely under a weight of sorrow which would have crushed a less hardy man. At times he deeply regretted that he had not promptly made public the particulars of the affair at the bridge that eventful night, but it was now too late to think of revealing it, unless he was prepared to stand trial for murder with small hope of escaping the extreme penalty of law.

After Boyne had worked the case to such a point the theory of accident would not be accepted; he must stand or fall on the hope that the detective would fail to make a discovery, and he did not really see how the truth could be learned.

The possibility of a person even more innocent than he being caught in the detective's web had never seriously occurred to him. Little did he think that the clouds were hovering so darkly over Evan Conrad, the very man for whose sake he had innocently brought about all this trouble.

After Hugh became sick in the house the last chance was gone to tell the truth.

He was seriously ill and in constant danger of arrest, and the Old Brigadier would not desert him.

It was always thus. Where the tender-hearted old veteran gave one thought to himself he gave two to others, and he had great pity for the minor troubles he found by the way, even though he carried a heavier load than any one else in the town.

Hugh was not doing so well as was to be hoped, and the Brigadier began to fear that he would yet have a run of fever. His condition, in this respect, was alarming. Besides the delicacies furnished by Edwina, the Brigadier was administering such medicines as he knew of and could obtain, but the result was not favorable.

The patient had too much to worry him. He thought most about his wife and child, of whom he had as yet given no definite account; but the presence of Edwards, alias Boyne, in the town was a constant source of excitement, and at times he insisted that the detective was on the watch for him.

These light-headed periods added to the Brigadier's worryment, and he almost feared to leave him alone lest he should do something rash.

In fact, all was worry with the poor old Brigadier. Besides carrying his own load he had to comfort and cheer Hugh, and all Buck Basin looked to him for aid and encouragement. He was their leader, their bulwark, and they came to him with every trivial trouble.

On the same night that Boyne and Pray visited Evan Conrad's house the Brigadier, utterly wearied out, went to sleep beside his son. He slept heavily, and for some hours.

When he awoke it was with a start, and a feeling that he had somehow neglected his duty.

He listened for sounds from Hugh, but heard none. He put out a hand to touch him. Hugh was not in the bed.

The Brigadier called his name, but there was no answer. Then alarm seized the veteran, and he hurriedly arose and struck a light. As it flared up a startling fact was revealed.

Hugh was not in the room!

The Brigadier's heart sunk. What he had feared and tried to guard against had come; Hugh had arisen in a period of mental irresponsibility and left secretly. But there was one hope left. He might not have gone from the house.

Quickly the veteran ran down, but this hope was dashed to pieces. There was no sign of the younger man, and the fact that the outer door was unfastened showed plainly that he had gone.

The Brigadier was almost in despair, and all kinds of dire calamities arose before his mind, not the least of which was that Bernard Boyne might be abroad and discover him. Or his unfortunate son might wander away in the Pyramids or upon the prairie and perish.

His resolution was soon taken. He would follow, and if such a thing was possible, Hugh should be brought back. So he ran up-stairs, hurriedly dressed, and went out into the night to search anywhere—everywhere—he knew not where—for the helpless wanderer.

In the meanwhile Bernard Boyne had gone to bed, and after lying awake for some time to consider the question of whether he should arrest Evan Conrad at once he fell asleep. For some length of time—he did not know just how long—he slept as usual, but finally awoke with a feeling that the fact was due to unusual causes.

Had he been awakened by a dream? If so, he did not remember it, and the perfect quiet which reigned in the room seemed a guarantee that nothing else had been responsible for it.

Carelessly he turned over, and was thus brought facing a window. The night was fairly clear, and the light which entered made half of the room bright and cheerful for the hour. But it was not this which attracted Boyne's attention. There was something more, and something so vastly more important that he became at once excited.

Between him and the window stood a man—or was it something else? It had the form of one, but the pale face, the gaze fixed on vacancy, and the statue-like immovability of the figure rendered the picture strange and weird.

Boyne gazed like one fascinated. A man was in his room, but who was it and what was wanted? Neither a burglar nor one intending personal violence was likely to pose as a statue and let valuable time go to waste.

But as the detective gazed a swift, startled look came to his face. There was something familiar in that other face, and it frightened Bernard Boyne. Had his lips framed the thought which was in his mind it would have been in this form:

"It is Hugh Benmarsh or his ghost!"

And the perspiration started out on his forehead, showing how badly he was terrified. But the still form by the window did not move. Gazing neither at the man on the bed nor out of the window, but at the blank wall, it stood there and never moved a muscle so far as Boyne could see—did not even seem to breathe.

The suspense was too much for the detective, and the very force of his fright, it may be, produced a revulsion of feeling which carried him to the opposite extreme. It certainly was not courage which moved him, but he suddenly sprang from the bed and darted toward the figure.

Then the latter stirred. Wheeling, he almost collided with Boyne, face to face, and then the detective's arms were thrown around him.

Boyne had no distinct idea of what he was trying to do, but he grappled and began a mechanical, yet desperate, effort to throw the intruder to the floor. The latter met him point for point, and a singular struggle began.

The detective had always been considered a strong man, but all his efforts seemed to be thrown away now. In vain he tried to throw his adversary by a wrestler's trick, or to beat him down with brute strength. The intruder resisted every lock, and his strength seemed something wonderful.

He acted only on the defensive, but did this with skill and ease.

Not a word escaped either man's lips, but there in the dark room they battled in a silence

which seemed almost ghostly, until Boyne began to wonder if he was not actually dreaming.

But the end was at hand.

His opponent suddenly aroused, and with an exhibition of strength which amazed and startled the detective, lifted him clear of the floor and hurled him upon the bed. But Boyne did not stop there. With such impetus did he go, he bounded off and fell half-stunned in the corner of the room.

How long he remained there he did not know; his mind was in confusion, and he had only a dim idea that if his terrible adversary would let him alone he would agree to such an arrangement; but his head gradually cleared and he began to feel more active interest.

Nothing was to be heard to indicate that any one else was in the room, so he cautiously rose to his knees and looked around. His late adversary was not visible. It seemed too much to hope that he had left the room, and Boyne was still hesitating when a rap sounded at the door.

This did not indicate that an enemy was in motion, and the detective sprang up and hastened to answer the summons. If any one upon whom he could rely was there he wanted his help.

It proved to be the proprietor of the hotel, lamp in hand.

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Boyne, but is anything wrong here? I have just discovered and driven out a burglar, but he got away without an examination and I'm afraid he has robbed somebody."

"How do you know he was a burglar?" curtly asked the detective.

"I recognized him. It was Brown Bob, a notorious character we drove out of town a year ago. Hang the fellow! he showed a good deal of cheek to come here, and if the boys were to get hold of him they would make matters warm for him."

"So you're sure 'twas Brown Bob?"

"Yes."

"Well, who is Brown Bob, anyhow?"

"A Hungarian."

"Humph!"

Boyne began to breathe freer, for the landlord seemed confident of what he said, but could not forget the fact that he had seen the "burglar" himself and, he believed, recognized a face that he had no desire to see.

He confessed that he had had a struggle with the intruder and had been worsted, and then suggested that they go out in search of him. But the landlord said this was useless. He had recognized Brown Bob and called his name, and the fellow was sure to get out of Buck Basin in the shortest possible time.

After his experience with the men of the village he would not tarry to meet them again, now that his presence was known.

Boyne was not sorry to yield the point. He had no great desire to go out and search, for he was very much afraid that he might find the man, and that he would prove to be another than Brown Bob.

He kept the landlord some time and led the conversation around to minor matters, then finally spoke of Brigadier Baldy. Without giving his companion opportunity to suspect anything, he made inquiries as to the Brigadier's family. Had he no children of his own?

The landlord replied in the negative. Benmarsh had never had but one child, and that one, a son, he had lost years before. And then Boyne took fresh courage. If Hugh was alive and near Buck Basin, the fact would probably be known. He had been nervous ever since he learned that he was in the same town with the elder Benmarsh, and his imagination had done the rest.

At least, he hoped such was the fact.

But if he had gone out he might have made a discovery that would have brought back all his fears. The Old Brigadier was leading Hugh through the street to their home. He had come upon his son much sooner than he hoped after leaving the house, and was taking him back.

Hugh plainly showed that he was not right mentally, but was so docile that there was no trouble about handling him.

The Brigadier was still greatly touched, however, and when he asked where the wanderer had been, the latter startled him still more by acknowledging that he believed he had been in a house somewhere and had a fight—he did not know where.

Heavy, indeed, was the heart of the veteran, but he never despaired when working for others. Their troubles had a claim upon him which nothing could take away, and he prayed for strength to meet any new danger which might arise from this unfortunate affair.

And so they went on to the house, little suspecting the experience which awaited them there.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BURDEN GROWS HEAVIER.

THE men had almost reached their destination when they observed a female figure approaching from the opposite direction. The Brigadier suddenly paused. He was both surprised and troubled. He could not imagine who was abroad at that hour, a time when no one was usually

astir in Buck Basin; and it occurred to him that it would not do to have Hugh seen.

He drew the young man back to the darker shadows of a house and waited for her to pass. Hugh rallied under this new complication, and took an interest in the matter which pleased his father. It indicated mental improvement.

But the woman did not pass. Instead, she paused directly before the Brigadier's house and began to examine it attentively. He looked on in wonder. Who was she, and what did her actions mean?

After a pause she advanced to the door and ran her hand along as though in search of a bell-knob. There was none there, but the possibility that she would knock and awaken Mrs. Benmarsh at such a critical moment startled the Brigadier anew.

"Hugh," he said, hurriedly, "I think I ought to know who that is."

"Do so, by all means," coherently answered Hugh.

"Will you remain here until I come for you?"

"Yes."

"And be careful not to show yourself?"

"Yes, yes; certainly. But go to her at once, or she will alarm the whole household."

It seemed a great risk to leave him alone, for his mental aberration might return, but there was no other way. The Brigadier hastened toward the woman. She heard him coming, and paused with her hand raised as though to knock.

Dark though it was the Brigadier saw at once that she was a stranger and his wonder increased. He determined to have an understanding.

"Good-evening, madam."

"Good-evening, sir," replied a low, timid voice. "I beg your pardon, sir, but will you tell me who lives here?"

"His name is Adam Benmarsh."

"Do you know if he is at home?"

"He is not, but if your business is important—perhaps he may be found."

"It is important, sir."

"May I ask what it is?"

"Excuse me, sir, but you have been so kind thus far that I am sure you will not be angry if I say that I can only tell him."

"Then you may tell as soon as you wish, for I am Adam Benmarsh," he replied. "But you—I never saw you. What! have you a child with you?"

For the first time he noticed that she was not alone. Beyond her was a small figure, and a small face was peering timidly past her. A sudden suspicion flashed upon the veteran.

"Girl!" he exclaimed, "who are you who seeks admittance to Adam Benmarsh's house?"

"Prove to me that you are he and I will tell you," she replied, with a caution born, perhaps, of past experience.

"The best proof lies in the fact that I am at my own door and know it to be unlocked. See?"

He opened the door a trifle and then reclosed it.

"I can doubt no longer," the young woman said, in an agitated voice. "I felt sure before, for the description was very correct, and I need hesitate no longer. Mr. Benmarsh, I am Hugh's wife!"

"I knew it! I felt sure it was so. Now may the Lord be praised for His goodness. My dear child, you are very, very welcome!"

The great tenderness which was in the veteran's heart was not to be denied, and he folded the little woman in his arms. She breathed a sigh of relief and rested there willingly. She had often heard of this great heart from Hugh, and knew that as far as his power went, the Old Brigadier was a rock which would stem the tide of trouble bravely.

But another thought was in his mind. He released her, bent and lifted the golden-haired child.

"His boy?" said the old man, in a tremulous voice. "My Hugh's son! Thank heaven, I see the child at last!"

"You are very kind," faltered the young wife, "but, oh! Mr. Benmarsh, Hugh is missing. He has gone—I don't know where."

"Be cheered, sad heart, he is nearer you than you think," was the quick reply.

"Near me? Oh! father Adam, you don't mean that he is here?"

"I mean just that, my dear, and if you will wait a moment I will call him."

"There is no need," said a hoarse voice beside them. "I am here!"

A faint cry passed down the woman's lips. She turned quickly. There stood Hugh Benmarsh, his arms opened to receive her. And in a moment more she was folded to his heart.

Happy tears rolled down the Old Brigadier's face, and he caressed the head of the wending child with hands that trembled perceptibly. He was very happy because of the re-union, but the cloud in the way of perfect happiness was not lost sight of for a moment. He knew that the best medicine for Hugh would be the presence of his loved ones, but matters were becoming even more complicated.

It had seemed difficult enough to shelter Hugh and provide for him secretly, but how would it be when the number was increased to three?

Not for a moment could he entertain thoughts of confiding in his wife, and it seemed impossible to keep the secret from her.

But when Hugh and his wife had finished their greetings the Brigadier saw the vital necessity of sheltering them at once. Both gave signs of great uneasiness, and he knew that Hugh, at least, must have rest.

His late mental aberration seemed entirely gone, but there would be a dangerous relapse if he was kept longer on his feet. There was but one way, and he led them all quietly to his room. Once there Hugh was forced to lie down, which he did with his boy beside him, and his wife and the Brigadier sitting at the bedside.

The latter's quick eyes soon perceived that Eulalie, as Hugh called her, was but little stronger than himself, and when she acknowledged that she had walked all the way from Oaktree, this did not seem strange.

There was an explanation which the Brigadier did not fully understand, but from which he gathered the fact that they had been together in some building which was burned: that they barely escaped alive; and had then become separated in the crowd which gathered to see the fire.

A ladder carelessly handled by the firemen had struck and nearly stunned Eulalie, and in this condition she and her child had been taken away to a hospital. The blow and a nervous relapse after the fright had kept her there some time, and as she and Hugh had before been in hiding, she dared not give her real name.

As a result she lost all trace of Hugh, even as he had done of her, and when she could leave the hospital she saw but one way—to go to Brigadier Baldy's house, hoping that her husband would find her there.

They were united at last, but under circumstances anything but favorable. He certainly could not get away from Buck Basin for some time, and as officers of the law were searching for him, he could not live there openly.

Clearly, he must remain in hiding, but the means of doing so were poor, indeed. There was no refuge for him but his father's roof, and that was but a poor refuge under the circumstances.

It seemed impossible for the three to remain there and not be discovered by the Brigadier's wife.

The veteran's responsibilities were increasing, and he felt that he had a load which, uphold it as bravely as he might, was likely to prove more than he could bear. Edwina Conrad would undoubtedly furnish food for the trio as willingly as she had done for one, but he had been nearly discovered by Boyne and Pray, and had only escaped by going out through a window.

Perhaps they had recognized him, however.

Then, as Hugh reflected, he stated that he believed he had gone to Boyne's room in his flighty period and had a fight with that man. If so, it was very likely that he had been recognized.

Trouble seemed threatening on all sides, and the veteran found but one source of consolation.

He believed that Bernard Boyne had found no evidence in the Shaffer Knight case, and hoped that he would soon give it up and leave the place. Then one danger would certainly be removed.

The Brigadier finally prevailed upon his "children," as he called them, to lie down, and then left the room with the excuse of seeking another room. Really, he dared not use another room, as his vixen wife would at once be suspicious, and he merely spread a blanket upon the floor in the upper hall and lay down there near Hugh's door as a guardian.

Troubled as he was weariness soon overcame him, and he slept peacefully and well for some hours. When he finally awoke, it was because of a dream.

He thought that he had been away for some days, and when he returned an execution was about to take place in the village, and in the doomed man he recognized one of his neighbors.

He had asked what crime had been committed, and a man replied:

"They say he is a murderer. We who know him, claim that he is innocent, but Bernard Boyne has outwardly proven him the slayer of Shaffer Knight, and the poor wretch must hang."

Brigadier Baldy awoke in a fright, and great was his relief to find it only a dream.

"But what if such a thing should really occur?" he thought. "What if they should accuse an innocent man? There would then be but one thing for me to do; I should have to surrender myself—But, no; I could not leave Hugh and his helpless one. Yet—yet—Ah! there would be no other way. No innocent person should suffer. In such a crisis, I should promptly tell my story and give myself up!"

At that moment, Boyne was arousing Pray at the hotel.

"Come," he said, "there is work for us to do."

"What work?" Pray asked.

"I have been thinking about our late discoveries, and though the evidence is far from conclusive, I am so afraid Conrad will run away, that we will arrest him at once!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CRUSADE OF THE PYRAMIDS.

WITH the aid of his allies Hendrickson jealously pursued his search for Floralice. Game Chicken was not much less anxious, while the old trailer they called to their aid was anxious to establish his reputation, if nothing more.

He began at the Gypsy shanty and pursued his work persistently at first. He found plenty of foot-prints outside, or claimed to do so, which were not visible to the other men, and then he led them on several trails which ultimately ended in nothing.

According to his assertion, the Lees must have done a good deal of traveling during their last day at the shanty, for there were any quantity of trails. These, however, all finally led back to the shanty.

For a whole day he kept them on the move, and it seemed to Hendrickson that about every foot of the first half of the Pyramids had been gone over. But nothing had been seen and nothing learned.

Nightfall found them once more back at the cabin, and then the guide leaned upon his rifle in an attitude supposed to be the proper one for a great trailer, and delivered a learned opinion.

"One thing is sart'in; them dusky chaps are about ez sharp ez they make 'em. It's cl'ar ez mud that all them trails we hev been follerin' was made on purpose ter fool us, an' it shows ree-markable sharpness on their part. Furdmore, ther actooal trail—that made when they lit out in 'arnest—was kivered up in a style quite amazin'. Them fellers would hev delighted Kit Carson in ther days when him and me was together, they're so amazin' sharp."

And the trailer nearly beat down a tree with a torrent of tobacco-juice ejected from his mouth.

Hendrickson was disgusted. He had lost all faith in the trailer. The repeated failures of the day, the man's persistent assertions that he was on the track and his loquacity, had combined to destroy what faith his employer before felt. He now suspected that the guide was utterly incompetent, and that nearly all his so-called trails had been imaginary ones.

He went back to his hotel in anything but a happy frame of mind, and he and Game Chicken endeavored to drown their woes and calm their perturbed spirits in a cloud of tobacco-smoke.

They were agreed upon one point—the sooner they dispensed with the veteran trailer the better it would be for them. A haphazard search of the Pyramids was better than to spend valuable time over useless or imaginary trails.

They were discussing the matter when the landlord informed them that Nick Nellis, a village boy, wanted to see Hendrickson on what he insisted was important business. As Hendrickson had bade every one look for Floralice, he did not hesitate to order that the boy be admitted.

He soon entered—a lad of about thirteen years, with a body so slender and lithe as to remind one of a snake, but though his face seemed unnaturally thin, he had a keen, wide-awake look, and was known as a shrewd, precocious boy.

"Well, Nick," said Hendrickson, abruptly, "what is it? I hear you have important business."

The boy gave his head a quick, short jerk. "You've heerd right, captain."

"What is your business?"

"You're ther chap what's lookin' fur Miss Heath?"

"Yes."

"Sort o' a guardeen fur her?"

"Never mind that. I am looking for her."

"Suppose a chap o' about my circumf'rence should be able ter give ye p'inters—is thar bul-lion inter it?"

"If you can give me news, you shall be paid in proportion to its importance."

Nick calmly took a seat and crossed his slender legs.

"That means big pay, I reckon, providin' that you think them Lee half-bloods are in ther conspiracion."

"I do think so."

"And you wanter find 'em?"

"Yes."

"Captain, I seen them ter-day?"

"To-day! Where?"

"In ther Pyramids."

"By Jove! this is business. Where and when? Go on, boy, and tell your story, and you shall be well paid. I have been hunting for them in the Pyramids myself, but without avail. How did you happen to see them, and what were they doing?"

"You rayther stagger me with ther multitude o' yer interrogs, but I reckon I kin answer by ther card. You see, I am a man o' wand'r'in' instincts, an' ther close air o' this walled city sorter stifles me. Result, I frequently go among ther hills whar all is free, an' I kin expand my broad chest like a bellus."

"I was thar ter-day, clear inter ther wildest part o' ther Pyramids, an' felt like a colt in clover. My hopes soon went down ter zero. I was a-thinkin' that I was far from ther mad-

din' crowd, an' all alone with Natur', when I heard human v'ices.

"Now, a v'ice intercalates a human bein', an' I looked fur ther person. I soon see'd him; two on 'him, except that one was a woman."

"Who were they?" Hendrickson interrupted.

"Nat Lee and Leah."

"Ha!"

"Sure ez you live. Whar they come from I don't know, but they sorter seemed ter spring up from ther solid ground, as 'twere. First thing I knowed they was near me. Seems they come from diff'rent directions, fur Nat planted hisself in front o' ther gal, an' sez he, sorter tart an' surly."

"You're jest ther person I wanted ter see."

"Wal, you seen me half an 'our ago," sez she.

"I mean that I want a perivate talk with ye," sez he.

"Proceed," she says, curtly.

"Girl, I am dissatisfied," sez Nat, with a scowl. "What sort o' a dance be you leadin' us? Did your bargain with us call fur any sech work ez this? Did I not specially say thar should be no crooked biz hingin' on voylence?"

"Wal, thar hasn't be'n none," sez she.

"Is woman-stealin' a light matter?"

"Be you afeerd?" asked she, with a sneer.

"Girl, whoever says Nat Lee is afeerd, lies, but I am too old a bird ter want ter run my head inter a noose or my body inter jail. I'll fight ther best man in Kansas fairly, or do any sensible crooked work, but this last trick is sure ter get ther whole on us inter a scrape."

"Nonsense!" says she, tossin' her head.

"You're ez headstrong ez most women be," sez he, "an' you would ride a hoss right ter destruction. But I won't hang on fur ther leap. Not much!"

"What do you perpose ter do?"

"Either ther prisoner or I leaves hyar."

"You kin go ez soon ez you please."

"No doubt you would be glad, but I want you ter know that though ther old woman is your devoted slave, I ain't, an' I'm not ter be ground under foot. I reckon you may hev heard o' ther Lee grit. You've got a good share on't, but what o' me? When my blood is up I rule or ruin. Take warnin'. Our blood tie ain't so thick or strong that I kin be led by ther nose. You want ter go mighty slow, or thar will be a breeze 'round hyar an' you will get blowed ter smash."

"Nat was in dead earnest, an' Leah she seen it; an' she come down off her high hoss quick. She was plainly afeerd o' him, or, rather, that he'd do mischief; an' she took a new tack. She began ter talk in a new vein an' be ez polite ez you please, an' ther way she soft-soaped him was amazin'."

"But Nat was no slouch, an' he didn't yield fur a cent. He tole her bluntly that somethin' new must be done ter git them out o' the tangle, an' that he'd hang to till it was settled, but that he'd be shot ef he'd let ther mill run an' grind him fur a grist."

"Well, what next?" demanded Hendrickson.

"They went off in sections. First, Leah v'amosed, an' purty soon Nat follered suit. I tried ter foller him, but ther place was a reg'lar jungle o' bushes an' rocks, an' I got clean left. Missed him complete."

"And saw no more of him?"

"Nary see."

"Nor of the others?"

"Nary see."

"Well, it's plain that you have made a discovery of importance. Don't you think so, Ben?"

"Looks like it," Game Chicken answered. "Ther den o' ther Lees must be nigh whar Nick seen them."

"Exactly. Well, I believe I shall promptly drop our so-called trailer, take Nick instead and begin an energetic search. Rough and tangled as the Pyramid country is, I believe careful search will reveal ther lair."

"An' thar's one thing in our favor."

"What?"

"Thar's a household wrangle. Nat Lee is in the dumps, an' may yet kick up a big row."

"And be a factor in our crusade. True! Well, the crusade goes on, anyhow."

Nick was then made happy by being engaged to guide them to the place where he had seen Leah and Nat, and it was arranged that they should be away before day had fairly dawned the next morning. In order to do this with as little stir as possible, it was arranged that both Hendrickson and the boy should pass the night under the same roof where Game Chicken made his quarters.

This was done, and Hendrickson thus remained ignorant of the night alarm at the hotel caused by Hugh Benmarsh's intrusion, as well as of the events which followed during the day.

By the time the sun arose they were well advanced among the hills, and Nick led the way eagerly toward their destination.

When they arrived, there was no sign of life. The place was extremely wild, but the quiet might never have been broken before by man so far as signs went to show. Nick, however, soon developed inactive signs. He found the place where, he claimed, Nat Lee had impatiently dug his heel into the earth while he talked with Leah.

Then began the search for a cave or cabin.

For a place of the size the Pyramids certainly deserved high rank for confusion and wildness. The whole place seemed to have been turned upside down, and as rocks, bushes and vines were there in profusion, it was slow, uncertain work.

The searchers were in earnest, and they soon discovered all kinds of strange places. The disappearance of Nat Lee was explained by finding a tunnel formed by vines, and there were many more like it. The men and Nick almost lost themselves in the hunt.

Noon found them no further advanced than they had been in the morning, and when they sat down to eat their cold dinner only Nick was in good spirits. He, however, could not be discouraged by anything.

He was the first to finish eating, and immediately went away to resume the search. Hendrickson and Game Chicken continued eating, and at the same time discussed all the points of the case.

They were thus occupied when something caused both to suddenly leap to their feet.

A shrill cry had suddenly sounded some rods distant—a cry plainly in Nick's voice, and so energetic and excited as to startle them.

"Has ther youngster struck a lead?" Game Chicken demanded.

"It certainly seems—"

Hendrickson did not finish the sentence. The cries suddenly broke out afresh, and it was plain that Nick was in some sort of a critical situation. They even believed that they could distinguish the word "Help!" among the rest.

Without another sentence both dashed away, making for the quarter of excitement as fast as the nature of the ground would admit, and spurred on by the boy's cries. To Hendrickson it seemed an almost interminable time before they reached him, but, finally bruised and breathless, they reached the end of a miniature tunnel and saw Nick.

They saw something else.

The place was open at but one end, and in this trap was a woman whom Nick, by means of prodigious efforts, was keeping from passing him.

The woman was Leah Lee.

Evidently she and Nick had had a personal encounter, for both were flushed and breathless, but as the dusky-faced girl saw Hendrickson, she recoiled with a look of dismay on her face.

He coolly advanced beyond the boy.

"So we meet again," he said, coldly.

Leah did not answer. She was looking persistently at the ground by this time, and dismay seemed struggling with sullen anger.

"Course you meet!" cried the irrepressible Nick. "She an' me met, too. Mighty warm meetin'. Most got my eyebrows bruised off."

"You have done nobly, my boy, and I will not forget it," said Hendrickson.

Leah's gaze was suddenly raised.

"Nor I!" she hissed. "I'd like to break his neck. You little viper! I will repay you for this. I never forget those who make war upon me, and when any one does this it is at his peril."

CHAPTER XXXII.

LEAH.

HENDRICKSON understood that this was a shot at him, but he neither had fear of Leah nor proposed to abate one jot of his crusade against her.

"You seem to have removed from your home," he said, quietly.

"Only for a few days," replied Leah, hesitatingly.

"Until after disposing of your prisoner."

The Gypsy girl changed color.

"My prisoner?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Pray don't waste time in professions of ignorance. You have caused Floralice Heath to be stolen, and now hold her prisoner—"

"Edgar!" exclaimed Leah, simulating surprise and reproach. "What do you mean? Why do you wrong me so cruelly?"

"Your own lips have confessed it."

"Who dares say so?"

"Never mind; enough that I can prove it. Yesterday you and Nat Lee stood not far from here, and he declared that he was angry with your course, and that by abducting Miss Heath, you had invited ruin to yourself, him, and the rest of your tribe. You denied nothing then. Deny nothing now, for it will be useless, but save yourself trouble by at once producing Floralice Heath."

"I know nothing about her."

"Nonsense!"

"I have not seen her for three days, nor do I want to. I can't claim to be a person in high life, but I have some regard for honor, and don't care to associate with such as Floralice Heath."

Nick whistled softly, as though to call attention to so remarkable an assertion, but Hendrickson, stern and frowning, took the Gypsy girl's arm.

"Oblige me by stepping back where we can talk alone," he tersely said.

She obeyed with the docility of a child, but, as he released his hold, suddenly said:

"Are you afraid that contact with me will contaminate you?"

"I do not understand."

"You let go of my arm quickly. Am I so repulsive to you? Your touch is magnetic to me. I wish—that you loved me or that I were dead!"

The words burst from her fiercely, but her full red lips quivered, and it was plain that she was deeply moved.

"Do you deserve it?" he coldly asked.

"I have tried to. I loved you from the time I first saw you, but you turned deafly away. My heart has yearned for your love, but has it been fed with new life?"

"I prefer not to discuss this. Let me ask in a word what you did when you found me unresponsive."

"I waited and hoped that you would change."

"And abducted Floralice Heath."

"You wrong me! you wrong me! I swear it. Why will you persist when every word is a stab at a heart that loves you?" Leah passionately cried.

"I persist because I am here with a fixed purpose, and will not be turned from it. Deny it as you will, Floralice has been stolen and is now held prisoner by you and your tribe. Why is your shanty at the base of the Pyramids now deserted? Simply because, after the abduction, you and your amiable relatives fled here. Nat does not approve of the affair; he is afraid trouble will result from it; but, all the same, you hold the prisoner. I am here to rescue her. Now, will you give her up?"

"I know nothing about her. She is not here, and—"

"Rubbish! Do not try to make me believe that you are weak-minded as well as unscrupulous."

The girl stood looking at the ground in sullen silence, grinding one heel into the soil.

Hendrickson watched her narrowly, studying her as he would a riddle on paper. But she was not so hard to read. She was guilty, deny it as she would; and worse than that, so resolute that it seemed impossible to make her yield.

"Well?" he said, after a pause.

"What?"

It was a short, ungracious, unpromising reply.

"Have you decided to speak?"

"I have spoken."

"Falsely! What I want is the truth, and to have you conduct me to Miss Heath. Will you do it?"

"I have no idea where she is, and I don't want to know. Necessarily, I must decline."

"Lead me to where you are now stopping, then."

A look of annoyance crossed Leah's face.

"Dame Hagar and my brothers are angry with the people of Buck Basin, and they would not allow it."

"Why angry?"

"Never mind."

"Let this folly cease. Your evasions are pitifully weak; let us have no more of them. You will either conduct me to your quarters or remain my prisoner."

"I will gladly remain your prisoner," she answered, and there could be no doubt of her sincerity. "If I could be near you, I would gladly go to a felon's cell for life."

"But you can't be near me," Hendrickson replied, with a curtness born of despair. "While I am searching for Floralice, with good chances of finding her, you will be a prisoner in close confinement."

"You are cruel as the grave!" she said, her voice trembling with mixed sorrow and anger.

"I am just."

With this brief answer Hendrickson turned away and joined Game Chicken and Nick below. There was no fear that Leah would escape from the *cul-de-sac*; the only way was up the low cliffs, and she never looked that way.

Hendrickson had already formed a plan which he proceeded to explain to the ex-pugilist. Plainly, the easiest way to learn where the lair of the Lees was would be to follow Leah there secretly. But how could this be done? At this point Hendrickson's scheme came in. He believed that the girl would soon tire of imprisonment when left alone, and seek to escape. Therefore he proposed to confine her in a certain little cave they had already found and ostensibly leave her secure, but, really, leave some weak point by means of which she could escape if she tried.

Once out she would probably start for the lair, but he would be on the watch, and where she went he would follow. If this plan could be worked her secret would soon be revealed.

Game Chicken caught eagerly at the plan and declared that it was sure to work, while he was delighted at the idea of arranging the little scheme so as to deceive Leah and lure her into the trap. It would be but a short task, he said.

Hendrickson willingly gave him charge of it with Nick as an assistant, and, when they had gone away, himself sat down at the entrance to the *cul-de-sac*. He did not look toward Leah, but, after a pause, she came to his side. Her

eyes were filled with tears, and, never seeking to pass, she began another appeal.

It was an interview which was not without a painful element, and would have been exceedingly so had he not thought of Floralice and steeled his heart.

He would not be blindly outwitted by this woman.

Her love was not more sincere than her devotion to crime.

It was a relief when Game Chicken returned and announced that the prison was prepared, and then the young man arose and took her arm. Once more she passively obeyed, and he led her to the prison. Game Chicken had not had much to do, but that much was well done. It looked like a strong place of captivity, but when Leah became restless and angry, as it was hoped she would do, she was sure to find the weak point.

"Are you ready to go in?" Hendrickson asked.

"Yes."

"I hope you don't mind the darkness of the prison."

"Not if it is your wish that I go in."

"It is."

He motioned toward the entrance, and she unhesitatingly passed through. Neither food, drink nor a comfortable resting-place was given her, but if this was severe it was occasioned by circumstances. Her captors hoped to see her yield before night.

The entrance was made secure, and then the trio turned away.

"Woman is queer critters," said the ex-pugilist, scratching his head slowly.

"Yes."

"That female would jump into a lake o' brimstone ef you ordered it."

"She is tending that way, anyhow."

"Women is a strange one," Game Chicken added. "When she loves, she throws her hull vim inter it, an' a volcanic eruption ain't no whar. She's faithfuller than a canine, which will foller ye ter yer grave an' mourn fur ye. That's strikin', but woman will beat it. Taken ez a rule, she, good or bad, will cling ter you in health or sickness, prosperity or woe. She will foller ye through drunkenness, crime, ther walls o' a prison an' ther regions o' Hades, an' ther more fortune an' yer feller-man kicks ye, ther more she loves ye. Funny, ain't it? Past understandin'. Regular riddle. I can't read it, nohow, but o' one thing I am sure—woman is a brick!"

This verdict passed without comment, and then Hendrickson gave directions for the next move.

For his part, he intended to watch persistently and see if Leah left her prison, but there was no reason why Game Chicken and Nick should remain in idleness. He suggested that they continue the search for Lee's quarters, and they readily agreed and went about it.

Left alone, Hendrickson lay down at a convenient point and began his watch.

It proved to be a long one, and he often grew impatient as time wore on, and fretted at his inactivity. Was he doing wisely to remain there when Floralice might be in danger at the hands of her rough captors? Would Leah come forth at all? Had all his planning been for nothing?

These questions became more troublesome in his mind as the hours wore on and the day grew old, and still there was no sign of Leah.

The sun moved down the western sky, but still a silence was around him which was almost deathlike, and still he seemed to be utterly alone in the Pyramids. Although no arrangement had been made he had scarcely expected Game Chicken and the boy to remain away all the afternoon. Why did they not come back to see how he was getting along?

Their prolonged absence began to trouble him. Had they gotten into trouble?

Lower and lower sunk the sun, and darkness would soon be at hand. There were already dark shadows in the ravines, which told of its advance. Still Leah did not appear. Still his allies remained absent.

The suspense and uncertainty had become actually painful.

What did it mean? Had everybody else left the Pyramids and—Ha! what was that? A stir at the point upon which he had so long kept his gaze fixed. What was it? Perhaps only the rustle of a leaf. No one was visible. And yet there had seemed to be more.

Once more he fixed his gaze persistently, and then his heart bounded with exultation as Leah stepped forth into view. After all she had left her prison, and it was a movement made by her while investigating that had first attracted his attention.

She seemed to have satisfied herself that no one was on watch, for, like a companion shadow of the place, she moved quickly across the open space and disappeared in a ravine. But she did not vanish from Hendrickson's sight. The chance for which he had waited was at hand, and he was on her track with the persistence, if not the skill, of an Indian.

No great amount of skill was needed. She seemed to feel confident that she was free from observation, and moved quickly and lightly for-

ward, gliding so steadily in one direction that the pursuer's hopes rose high.

There was, indeed, room to hope that he would be able to find the Gypsy lair at last.

He followed for several minutes and found himself being led beyond the region in which he had believed the lair to be, but Leah finally entered a broad ravine where short, dwarfed trees and bushes seemed to hold full sway.

There it was harder to follow, for the shadows of night were heavy, but the way was fairly open, and he experienced no trouble on that score.

Finally the girl paused and he saw a hut before them. It nestled under the trees at the foot of a cliff, and seemed to be an insignificant affair, but it was plainly for this that Leah had been making. She stopped at the door and tried to open it, but without avail.

Almost at the same moment, however, heavy footsteps sounded close at hand, and a man strode toward her. Even in the darkness Hendrickson recognized Nat Lee, and he felt renewed confidence. The Gypsy, however, came to a sudden halt as he saw Leah, and then allowed the breech of his rifle to fall heavily to the ground.

"Ha!" he exclaimed in a voice anything but friendly, "so it's you. What in perdition do you want here? Couldn't you be content with drivin' me out, but must follow me here an' kick up a fresh row? What new scheme is in your fertile brain?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NAT CHANGES HIS MIND.

LEAH made a quick, deprecating gesture.

"Don't turn against me now, Nat. I have come to you to humble myself, and my heart is breaking. Don't crush me utterly!"

The big Gypsy looked surprised.

"Hallo! what's up now?"

"Everything is going wrong. The Pyramids are full of men searching for that Heath woman—"

"I know that."

"And both Kit and the old woman are in mutiny. The money promised us for stealing the girl is not forthcoming, and Webber now says he can't get it. Kit and Dame Hagar swear that it's 'no pay, no work,' and are all against me. You know what they are when they get started. No argument can move them; they won't listen to reason. That's why I have come to you."

"In other words, failin' ter make fools o' them, you have come ter me," growled Nat.

"No, no! I don't want to make a fool of anybody. Oh! Nat, I am about heart-broken and in despair. Don't you turn against me!"

"I tol' you last night that I had quit, an' I mean it. I ain't sorry on the whole. I dunno why I've stuck ter ther gang ez long ez I hev. The old woman is a fool, an' Kit is a stubborn mule. I am done with them, an' with you."

"Nat, don't say that. Don't see a woman in despair and then turn a deaf ear. I know you don't like me, and it is only natural. We have quarreled often, and my hot temper was mainly responsible for it. But I'm low down now, and I feel like crawling at your feet. Don't crush me any more than I am already crushed."

"Heigho!" quoth Nat, evidently surprised, "the queen is humble. What do you want o' me, girl?"

"I want the prisoner taken out o' the hands of Kit and the old woman."

"Dismiss them."

"They would go straight to Buck Basin and betray me, and as I can't get the prisoner away alone, she would be there and be rescued. I want you to join me and aid me to get her away. Drop your scruples for once; you are as bold as a lion, and have run greater risks."

Nat did not answer at once, and Hendrickson watched him with almost as much interest, though not with the nervous anxiety of Leah. The detective saw hope in this discord in the abductor's camp.

Suddenly the big Gypsy aroused.

"I'll walk with ye toward the cave, an' we'll talk it over an' see. Come!"

He swung his arm around her waist as he spoke. She perceptibly shrunk from the caress but only for a moment. Then they walked away together.

Hendrickson followed as closely as he dared. He wished then that stout Game Chicken was with him, but wished in vain. He must follow the adventure alone for the present, take what turn it might. Nat Lee's manner rather surprised him, and he began to have a suspicion in his mind that the supposed relationship between him and Leah was a purely imaginary one. When his manner so abruptly changed it became more lover-like than brotherly.

They went down the ravine and then nearly due east, and at so slow a pace that Hendrickson had no trouble about following. In this way he was led to still another new locality.

Finally a ravine was reached where, if the now almost total darkness was not deceptive, the walls thereof were a mass of vines and bushes, and the pursued disappeared at one side as beyond a veil.

Hendrickson pressed forward and found that

the vines formed a veritable curtain, behind which was some sort of a recess. All was intensely dark, however, and though he was letting them gain on him he would not follow too precipitately. The Lees were not people to use soft-gloved hands in an emergency.

Creeping forward, he felt his way for fifty feet and then found a gap in the wall of rock at his right, and this was so suggestive of a cave that he determined to test it. Accordingly he advanced in that direction, moving very slowly, and keenly on the watch for danger.

The passage resolved itself into a place where, it seemed, the cliff had sometime been rent asunder, and he was just beginning to lose faith in his first idea when the faint glow of a fire became visible.

Instantly he was on the alert, and with all haste that he dared use he went further forward. If he was really near the party he sought, he wanted to get eyes on them at once. He was not disappointed. Rounding a corner of rock, he saw the fire, with Nat and Leah by it. They were near—so near that only his own caution saved him from discovery.

But he saw no one else. A spacious cave-chamber was beyond him, but only two persons were visible.

Stay! There were signs of occupancy, if not of many occupants. Cooking utensils were near the fire, and other articles which seemed suitable to the Gypsies.

If he had doubted before, he was soon convinced. From the further end of the place a female form suddenly appeared, and he at once recognized Dame Lee.

She advanced and looked at the couple by the fire in anything but an amiable mood.

"So you're back, my bold lad?"

"As you see," Nat coolly replied.

"I thought you had sworn not to come to us again while this girl was with us."

"Changed my mind," Nat tersely returned.

"You don't seem to hate Leah as much as you did."

"No."

"By the fiends, I do!" cried the old woman, smiting one hand upon the other. "Do you know, she can't get any money for us."

"No?"

"Not a cent. Now, we've been and stolen the other girl, all because she promised us money from Webber, and that little fool says he can't get the money. More likely, he don't care to get it, now the girl's stolen—curse him!"

"Take it easy, old woman."

"Easy! What's come over you, Nat Lee? A little time ago you were howling and cursing, and now you're a lamb, a-grinning at Leah. What does it mean?"

"Wal, you see Leah an' me have made up."

"Oh! you have, eh? Maybe you'll pay me the money."

"I'll give you my note," Nat replied, with a broad smile.

"Clarence Webber is coming here to-night," added Leah. "Make him pay."

"I'll try, and if I fail somebody will be sorry for it. I was a fool to move at all until I saw the cash, but you were in a great rush."

She addressed the remark to Leah, but met with no reply. Instead, the latter seemed defiant, and the old woman looked at her fixedly several moments before she turned away. Probably Dame Hagar had seen too much of the world to trust this sudden peace between the young people, followed as it was by Leah's change of mood.

As for Hendrickson, he was considering his next move. Beyond a doubt Floralice was in the cave, but how was she to be rescued? If he had been backed by Game Chicken he would have moved at once, but Nat was a giant, well-armed and desperate, and the old woman was said to always carry a revolver and be a dead shot.

Unless he could actually see Floralice, he did not care to engage such odds.

"I reckon I must back out and hunt up Game Chicken. Probably Kit Lee is in the cave, and it will be no mean attempt to whip this crowd. With Ben at my back, however, I can and will risk the odds."

He was about to turn away when, without the slightest warning, something which he thought might have been a locomotive ran against him from the rear, and he was flung forward with such force that he fell prostrate at Dame Hagar's feet.

Leah uttered a little scream and Nat sprung up with an oath, but before Hendrickson could make a successful move to rise a heavy weight beat him down again, and he caught a glimpse of Kit Lee's face.

The fellow seemed in a very vicious mood, and the probability that he might be murdered on the spot stirred Hendrickson to resolute action.

Putting forth all his strength he whirled Kit to one side, but he sprung to his feet only to find himself facing a revolver in Nat's hand.

"No you don't, critter!" exclaimed the big Gypsy. "I've got a word to say about this affair. Hold right on whar you be!"

It was a command which meant business, but Hendrickson was himself fully aroused. His hand went into his pocket and then came out

holding a revolver, and the battle would quickly have been opened in earnest but for the intervention of another party.

Leah sprung forward and threw her arms about Hendrickson, effectually shielding him from Nat.

"Let him alone!" she cried. "I, too, have a revolver, and I will use it if you touch this man!"

Nat's face grew dark with passion.

"Oh! you will, eh?" he cried. "Didn't you tell me you would throw him over an' take me?"

"That makes no difference; you shall not harm him. Let him alone!"

"Just give me a hack at him," said Kit, who had risen, and he tried to move around to the rear.

In a moment Leah's revolver covered him.

"Stand where you are!" she cried.

"Just so," coolly added Hendrickson. "I am also in this game, and I decline to be shot. You fellows can't carry too high a hand, or I'll show you what I can do at shooting. Come, men, be reasonable and listen to me. I have no wish to quarrel with you if you will be sensible. All I ask is that you will produce Floralice Heath. You'll never get any money from Clarence Webber, for he could not buy you a second hand coat. Your easiest way is to throw up a bad bargain and let me take Miss Heath. As for you, Nat, I won't stand in your light; you can have Leah."

"Don't you trust him, lads!" cried Dame Hagar. "He's a liar and I know it. Kill the spy!"

"Keep off!" retorted Hendrickson. "I'll shoot the man who stirs first."

It was an awkward pause, and a brief silence followed. Leah did the quickest thinking of all. She felt that the intruder was only too sincere in offering to give her up, but her hopes were hard lived. In some way she trusted that she might win him yet, and would not let her anger rule the hour. She still sheltered him as much as possible with her own person and faced the Lee brothers defiantly.

"This is a pretty business!" cried Dame Hagar. "Are we to be bullied in our own home like this?"

"You are not to be allowed to steal innocent girls, anyhow," Hendrickson answered. "Let me assure you that the safest way for you is to give Floralice up quietly. Do this and you shall not be prosecuted. Refuse, and it will be made hot for you."

"The girl is not here."

"Floralice Heath is here!"

The words sounded behind the old woman, and she wheeled like a flash. There stood Floralice, herself, looking remarkably calm and self-possessed; so all denials would henceforth be thrown away. But she turned to Leah with a look anything but mild.

"I hope you are satisfied with your work now, but do not flatter yourself that I am any longer in the dark."

"I don't know what you mean, but—"

"I will tell you what I mean, and in few words. Your disguise is a good one, but I know you at last. I know you, and I find your heart the same as of old."

"You are talking wildly," began Leah, falteringly, but Floralice vehemently interrupted:

"Wildly! Why shouldn't I be wild? Is it natural that I should be calm when I am hunted down by my own sister?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

REVOLVER-SHOTS IN THE DARK.

HENDRICKSON could not avoid a start, and for once Leah's ready tongue seemed to lose its power. She looked confused and dismayed, and strange as the accusation seemed, the detective believed it to be true.

"My sister!" Floralice added, with cold sarcasm. "Who would look for such devotion as yours when the tie is so distant. Only sisters, and yet your heart is warm. You do not forget me."

"The least said here the better," Leah hurriedly interrupted.

"No doubt you think so."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand only too well, Frances Heath. You gave a sample of your imperious, over-riding way some years ago, and showed that where your interests were concerned you would stop at no crime. You are still the same. I chanced to be in your way, so I was kidnapped and shut up here—and by my sister!"

Hendrickson looked in silent wonder. For the first time he saw a likeness between these girls. There was the same hard, imperious way, but as he looked at Floralice's beautiful face he mentally breathed a prayer that, despite adverse circumstances, she might prove to be other than a criminal.

The Lees no longer showed a disposition to force matters to a crisis with their revolvers. The principals were on the scene, and they seemed content to let them settle the whole affair. Leah, however, was not in a mood for action. She was almost crushed. In order to win Hendrickson she had abducted Floralice, and now the lovers met again and her rival had

unmasked her in the presence of the man she aspired to win.

"Well," curtly added Floralice, "have you nothing to say?"

"If you will wait, I will explain."

"Nonsense! You merely wish to avoid exposure in the presence of Edgar Hendrickson."

"There need be no hesitation on that score," interrupted that gentleman. "I understand already that you were abducted because Leah thought that I cared more for you than for her. We need not discuss this point. I am here to conduct Miss Heath back to Buck Basin, and as the secret of the case is a secret no longer, I think I may as well go at once. I hope no one will oppose me."

"It's jest as Leah says," put in Nat Lee. "Ef she bids you two go free, you can scoot; if she says not, no human power kin take you through. Which is it, Leah, girl? Speak out!"

She of the dusky face looked at Hendrickson, and there was eloquence in her gaze. Crushed and helpless, she could only mutely implore him to turn from her rival and to her. Twice her lips moved before she spoke, but blind, indeed, would she have been not to see that his cold, set face gave no encouragement.

Finally she answered:

"I must talk with you and the rest first. Mr. Hendrickson—and that woman—can go back to the other room and wait for our verdict."

"Why should you hesitate?" the detective asked.

"I may want to blow this cave and all its contents to ruin!" the girl fiercely replied.

"Not me—I pass!" cried Nat.

Floralice made a quick motion to Hendrickson which seemed to bid him agree to Leah's plan, and he objected no longer. They retired to an alcove off the main room, where the prisoner had been kept, and the Lees gathered for consultation.

The young couple paused where they could watch.

Before the conference could be begun, however, there was a stir in the other room, and Clarence Webber appeared from the direction of the entrance. It was no surprise, even to Hendrickson, after what he had heard, but Floralice's hand closed tightly over his arm.

"There is one who is as much to blame as she is," Miss Heath said, in a hard voice.

"Webber is a rejected, revengeful suitor?"

"Yes."

"His race is about run, I think. From what I have overheard it seems that he promised the Lees a good deal of money and now he can raise nothing. They are very bitter against him—Ah! he is learning it now!"

Such was the fact. Dame Hagar had promptly proceeded to ventilate her grievance, and was standing in front of Clarence, pouring out her anger in a way peculiar to her nimble tongue, and shaking her fist near his face, while Nat and Kit backed her up, and scowled darkly on him. Dissensions there might be in the family, but all were agreed on one point; they loved money, and Clarence had failed to make good his promise to pay them.

Clarence was frightened; there could be no doubt as to that; and he made desperate efforts to argue the matter and, probably, to re-establish his reputation.

How he succeeded those in the alcove could not tell, but after a stormy interview of ten minutes, Dame Hagar's violence abated, and it seemed probable that some compromise had been arrived at.

Hendrickson would not have stood there to see the end of the interview, but Floralice assured him that there was but one way out of the cave, and the indifference of the Lees confirmed this statement.

Perhaps half an hour passed, and then Nat, Clarence and Leah walked away into the dark recesses of the cave at the north. Kit threw himself down by the fire, and the old woman advanced toward the alcove.

Reaching Hendrickson and Floralice, she gave her head a quick, short jerk.

"You can go," she said.

"Back to Buck Basin, do you mean?"

"Anywhere you see fit."

"Thanks. We will go at once."

Hendrickson spoke coolly, and, motioning to Floralice, led the way to the main room. Kit had lighted a short, black pipe and was smoking slowly, looking sullenly into the fire.

The scene was peaceful enough, but Hendrickson placed no great amount of confidence in it. He believed the Lees capable of any crime, and expected a shot from the interior as they passed the fire. None came, however, and they entered the passage safely.

"Are we really going out unmolested?" Floralice doubtfully asked.

"I wish I could believe it, but I have no confidence in these people."

"But we have left them all behind."

"Are you sure?"

"They are all in the cave."

"Unless there is another place of exit. It is that which I fear. They may have gone out to prepare an ambush."

"Do you really fear it?"

"I have no confidence in them. I don't want

to alarm you, but it is not safe to trust them. Nat Lee is a desperate man, and Webber and Leah rank but little below him in that respect. Is the latter really your sister?"

"You heard what I said. Don't ask me more now."

Floralice spoke nervously, and the subject was dropped. It was no time to pursue it. They were nearing the outer air, and Hendrickson felt that he needed to be keenly on the alert for danger. The way was intensely dark, and assassins might lurk at any step.

They reached the curtain of vines and went on. A few steps more and they would be in the ravine.

Suddenly Hendrickson paused. Was that a footstep, or did his ears conjure up the sound? He pressed Floralice back, and both stood close to the wall of rock. A footstep? Yes; there can no longer be a doubt of it. Some one besides themselves was astrir.

He pressed Floralice's arm significantly, and neither spoke a word. Some one was advancing along the passage, in the way they had just come. The unknown might have no evil motive, but the detective did not trust him.

He came nearer—nearer yet.

He reached their side—was so near that they might have touched him.

Then he went on. Who it was they could not tell. All persons were alike in that dark place. But he passed and advanced toward the end of the curtain.

Suddenly the almost total silence was broken, rudely, and in a startling way. There was a flash of light in front of the unknown, the report of a revolver, a groan, a fall. All had been so quickly done that it seemed but a breath of time when the unknown was down, dying, perhaps; certainly wounded.

He was not dead. There was another flash of light after a moment; this time at a place and height which indicated that he had raised himself on his elbow and fired; and a startled cry followed it.

The tables had been turned.

Hendrickson waited for no more. Grasping Floralice's hand he sprung at the vine-curtain and began a fierce attempt to fight his way through. It resisted for a moment, but he whipped out his knife, and the keen blade did good work. Voices were sounding behind them, and he thought he distinguished Kit Lee's, but just in the nick of time the fugitives fought their way through the curtain.

The ravine lay before them, and they made all haste to get away from the locality of danger. As they went they could hear quick, excited voices at the place they had just left, and it spurred them on.

"Murder has been done!" said Floralice.

"I believe it."

"But who is—the victim?" she faltered.

"That I don't know, but one thing I think I do understand. A trap was set for us, and one of the trappers ran into it. I mistrusted them all the time, and I now believe that they intended to kill us both. Some flaw in their plans evidently proved fatal."

"Poor Frances!" sighed Floralice.

"You feel for her, guilty as she is."

"She is my sister, and I believe her temper amounted to mania. I hope—"

She did not finish the sentence, and they hurried on down the ravine. Hendrickson no longer had any great fear of pursuit, but they were in the heart of the Pyramids, and it would be no easy matter to reach Buck Basin.

Even as he was thinking this, two figures appeared in front of them and he threw up his revolver. Had the Lees made better progress down the ravine than they? Was there to be a deadly fight, after all?

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BLOW FALLS.

WHEN Brigadier Baldy arose he devoted his thoughts exclusively to those dependent upon him, as usual. He had more need of care and skillful planning than ever before. Not only Hugh, but Hugh's wife and child, were on his hands, and it would be a wonder if he could keep their presence a secret from his own vixen wife.

Luckily he had food enough to last them all during the forenoon, and Hugh's condition was very encouraging. The presence of his loved ones was the best medicine he could have had, and a perceptible gain cheered the old Brigadier's heart.

He gave Eulalie careful injunctions to keep the child quiet, and then went down as usual to his own breakfast.

As usual, too, Mrs. Benmarsh had some cause to exercise her tongue, and as it was a fresh, though insignificant, grievance, she showed uncommon expertness in abusing some person to us unknown.

The Brigadier pursued his old policy of silence and let her go on unmolested; indeed, he hardly heard a word she said. He had more important matters on his mind.

Breakfast eaten, he left the house, and started toward Evan Conrad's. He noticed a crowd in front of the hotel, but, as this was quite common, paid no attention to it. He wished to give

Edwina directions and have the food ready by noon.

"If only discovery can be averted for a few days," he thought, "I feel sure that Hugh will be so well that he can go on to some other town. I will somehow get money enough to help him there—him and his loved ones. I trust this cloud will soon pass away. As for Bernard Boyne, he is evidently getting no new evidence in the Knight case, and he will soon become disgusted and go away."

With this cheerful view of the case the Old Brigadier walked on toward Conrad's.

As he neared the house he saw smoke arising as usual, but no one was visible. This was not strange, and as he was never in the habit of rapping, he opened the door and walked in uninvited.

Still silence; still no one was visible.

Perhaps the young couple were late, and still at breakfast. He opened the kitchen door and entered. Evan was not there but Edwina was, and as he saw her Brigadier Baldy started back in dismay.

Was this woman who sat weeping by the uncovered table the ordinarily cheerful Edwina? Yes; she lifted a pale, tear-stained face, and the change startled the old man.

"Child, what is wrong?" he cried.

The young wife threw herself on her knees at his feet and clasped his hand.

"Oh! I wish I were dead! I wish I were dead!" she wildly cried.

"Dead! Oh! my dear girl, do not speak like that. It is not like you. Come, rise and take a chair again. Let me hear your trouble, and perhaps I can help you. At least, I will try."

"Nobody can help me now."

"Edwina, what is wrong?"

"They have taken Evan away!"

"Taken him away! Who has done it, and why?"

"It was Bernard Boyne, and—oh! Mr. Benmarsh!—they accuse him of killing Shaffer Knight!"

The Brigadier recoiled.

"Accuse—whom?"

"Evan. He is arrested for murder!"

Brigadier Baldy sat like one turned to stone. His ruddy face which had not known of old how to grow pale was now pitifully white, and every feature seemed to have frozen. His eyes were unnaturally large, and his gaze fixed on vacancy, and Edwina's sorrow was outwardly weak compared to the horror on his broad face.

Finally his lips moved.

"Evan arrested for murdering Shaffer Knight!" he said, in a husky whisper.

"Oh! he never did it; I know he did not!" she cried.

"But why is he arrested?"

"I don't know; Boyne said the proof was overwhelming against him."

"Are you sure he was arrested—formally arrested?"

"Yes. The detective said, in plain words: 'I arrest you for the murder of Shaffer Knight!'"

"But he is not guilty."

"I know he is not. He told Boyne so, and he would not lie. Besides, he is incapable of such a deed."

"But what could have led Boyne to arrest him?"

The Brigadier was speaking like one in a dream, and without any idea that he was addressing Edwina, but he heard her answers vaguely.

"It was the work of Brian Markoe—I know it was. He hates Evan because he is my husband, and swore that he would have revenge; and he told me some days ago that Evan was guilty. Now he has told his lie to Boyne, and they will take Evan away and kill him. Oh! I wish they had killed me when they took him away. My heart is breaking, Brigadier Baldy, and I wish I were dead. They will take him to prison, and nobody that Ebenezer Pray puts there ever gets away. They will murder him—murder him!—and I—oh! my heart is breaking!"

Brigadier Baldy had never before seen such wild, passionate sorrow as this, and it brought him out of his dazed condition. The blow had been a terrible one to him, for, just when his efforts were needed most a calamity had come which left him no choice.

Evan Conrad was arrested for murder—for killing Shaffer Knight—and he must at once tell the whole truth and surrender himself. It was a bitter necessity, when Hugh and his helpless ones had no other protector, but even if Evan might escape the extreme penalty of law after his trial, the Old Brigadier could not see Edwina suffer thus.

Let come what might, he must speak out at once.

His noble face grew lofty, pitiful and tender as he arrived at this conclusion, and he laid his broad hand on her fair head.

"Be cheered, sad heart!" he said, in a deep voice. "It is not as bad as you think, and I will save him yet. I say to you in all sincerity that you need not fear for Evan. You shall have him safely back before night."

Edwina sprung up and seized his hand.

"Oh! will you—can you do that? They call

you the bulwark of Buck Basin, and I know your heart is greater than any other man's. But can you save him?"

"I can and will."

"Oh! may Heaven bless you, Brigadier; you don't know how happy you have made me! Go to him at once—go and send him back to me! Save him, Brigadier—don't let anything stand in the way of your doing it."

"Nothing shall," serenely replied the old man. "I will go at once, and he shall be saved; he shall come back to you. Kiss me good-by—I mean good luck—and I will go."

Her lips were pressed to his, all unconscious that that kiss meant a farewell, and with a tender blessing the Brigadier left the house. He walked firmly, and his calm face and erect form seemed like those of one wholly at peace with the world and happy. Yet his heart seemed breaking.

His course was toward his old home, and he was going to bid farewell to Hugh, Eulalie and the child. He was about to make a vast sacrifice. He must leave his own loved ones to others' kindness, and the Ruler of all men, in order to save Evan Conrad.

It was the penalty of his crime.

His crime! He still called it that, admitting no extenuating plea, and he was prepared to sacrifice himself. He would have given all his worldly possessions to delay until Hugh was safe, but it could not be. He considered himself a criminal, and any delay would be in defiance of everything which should be heeded.

Evan Conrad must be saved.

When he reached his own house he entered at once, and, unheeding the fact that Mrs. Benmarsh was not visible in the lower part of the house, made his way up-stairs. As he ascended he heard the virago's shrill voice there, but dimly supposed she was talking with Clarence, and it was not until he had fully ascended that he saw that she stood in the doorway of his private room.

She had discovered his secret guests.

Yes, there she stood, arms akimbo and head thrown on one side, pouring out a torrent of abuse on the unfortunate victims of her wrath.

Calmly the Old Brigadier pushed past her and stood in the room. Hugh had been almost mutely listening to her, while Eulalie clasped her child to her bosom and looked the picture of dismay.

One moment the woman was abashed by the interruption, and then her old audacity returned.

"So," she cried, in a loud voice, "I have your secret at last! This is why you have been so much of a hermit! This is why you have always been short of money! This is what you have lavished all your scant courtesy upon—your forger son!"

She pointed a long, bony finger at Hugh, and seemed to think she crushed all the others with her dignity.

"Your forger son!" she repeated. "Your convict son, that should be—your jail-bird son! And my poor, dear boy is denied the smallest pittance of life, while your son rolls in wealth and luxury. A pretty state of affairs, indeed!"

"Whatever has been is now past," the Old Brigadier replied, as calmly as though his heart was not bleeding. "In the future none shall have cause to complain of partiality, for to-day I step out of the arena of life. After this I shall worry no one. I have come—"

"Oh! yes, you can make fair promises, now I have detected your infamous double-dealing!" cried Mrs. Benmarsh. "But don't you think I will believe you. We won't, nohow! A man who will give all to his convict son and let my dear, innocent, honest boy, Clarence, suffer for want of money is—"

"Wait!" said the Brigadier, steadily. "If you will hear me, madam, I will convince you on one point at least. I am about to—"

Once more the terrible secret trembled on his lips, but again he was interrupted. Two stern-faced men entered the room, looked keenly around, and Hugh Benmarsh grew paler than ever.

One of the men advanced toward him with slow, heavy steps.

"I am looking for one Allen Gray, an escaped convict," he said, stoically. "You are he. I arrest you in the name of the law!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE OLD BRIGADIER SPEAKS PLAINLY.

UTTER silence followed the last words, but those who were in any degree in the secret could not doubt that they had been spoken in earnest. The intruders were strangers, they had an official bearing, and had selected Hugh without trouble.

He knew one of them only too well. He had been an officer in a certain State Prison from which he had escaped, and it was he and others who had been pursuing the unfortunate young man.

The intrusion and the abrupt assertion proved too much for Hugh, and the room seemed to swim around him. Another moment and his head fell back in his chair, and he lay there so still and white that Eulalie hurriedly put down her child and sprung to his side.

"He has fainted!—he has fainted!" she cried.

The officer caught up a pitcher of water.

"Use this," he tersely said.

Brigadier Baldy seemed incapable of moving or speaking. Trouble was literally descending upon him in a deluge, and this new calamity made his position all the more bitter. He had been impatient to get away and clear Evan Conrad from a false charge, but how could he leave at such a time?

"I expected this!" quoth Mrs. Benmarsh.

"Your forger son has run his race, and—"

The Brigadier pointed toward the door.

"Go!" he said in a low, deep voice.

His manner awed her for once.

"Oh! very well," she said with a toss of her head; "if I am not good enough to stay here, I'll go!"

And she flounced out of the room.

The Brigadier saw that Eulalie was doing all that was possible for Hugh, and he turned to the nearest officer, much of his old calmness back again:

"Sir," said he, "I am the father of this unfortunate young man. Do you really mean to arrest him?"

"Yes."

"He is not fit to be moved from here."

"Then we shall wait until he can be moved."

A doctor shall settle that point. Were you aware when you sheltered him that he was a fugitive from justice? But of course you were. Perhaps you are also aware that your course may get you into trouble."

"That part is of no consequence. I am an old man, and fast nearing my grave—faster than you think, perhaps. I ask nothing for myself. But my boy—can nothing move you to give up your intentions in regard to him?"

"Not much. Call him what you will, he is a desperate criminal. He was in prison for forgery when he escaped—and, by the way, there is a mystery about that escape. He was gotten out by a woman. What woman? Perhaps this one who seems so broke up now that justice has come to him."

He looked suspiciously at Eulalie, but she turned toward him quietly:

"In one word," she answered, "I can prove an *alibi*. Do not suspect me, for I have a child for which to care."

"I'll take your word for it, just now, for you don't look the size that Horace Ames did, but if you are him nobody can get you out. I've made one scoop, and I'd like another. I say, Allen Gray, old boy, are you ready to go with me?"

Hugh had opened his eyes and was looking at them understandingly, but he looked like one whose life was fast oozing away.

"Do with me as you will," he answered, "and if you would be merciful, kill me at once. Better that than to part in life from my wife and child."

"Quite poetic, but hardly to the point," said the official from the prison.

"Our man is not fit to leave here now," said the second officer, critically. "What he wants is a bed and a doctor. Lie down, Gray!"

Hugh endeavored to obey, but was so weak that the Brigadier and another man had to help him. The village doctor was then sent for. He came and pronounced the case critical, and peremptorily declared that the patient must not be moved until he was much better. Unless he had rest and good care, he would not answer for his life.

The room was accordingly turned into a hospital, and the officers prepared to make the best of the situation. They regarded their capture as of sufficient importance to admit of some inconvenience, and settled down to put up with the inevitable.

Brigadier Baldy seemed like one stunned. Despite his promise to Edwina he did not go to the hotel and tell the story which was to free Evan Conrad, but it was because he was almost literally heart-broken. How could he leave while affairs were at such a point in his own home?

Both Hugh and Eulalie leaned wholly upon him. They did not expect him to save Hugh from prison, but Eulalie wanted his advice almost constantly, and the sick man as often sought him to care for his wife and child when he was taken away.

The poor Old Brigadier was between two fires, and he knew not what to do. As the emergency at home seemed the most pressing, however, he remained there and did not even see the villagers who had come to him in the new crisis for help.

The time had at last come when he felt incapable of helping any one.

Thus passed the forenoon.

Shortly after this as one of the officers was pacing along the side of the house he was approached by a stranger who first politely asked for a match, and then came to more important business.

"I hear you have business up there."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Got old Benmarsh's son, they say. Now, that is none of my business, and I don't care about it. What I am interested in is his wife—I hear he has a wife. I'd like to see her, if agreeable to you."

"You would. Why?"

"I suspect that she might do me a favor of importance. Fact is, I'm a private detective, and I've been on a trail of late which may take her in."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Sowders—Tom Sowders. And speaking of names, isn't hers Eulalie?"

"What if it is?" demanded the officer, with growing suspicion.

"Simply this: If it is, she can help me in my work if she will, and as I said before I am on a trail. I have been on it for some time, and of all the blind ones I've struck, it's the worst. But you will make all serene if you will let me see Mrs. Eulalie."

"I decline. Whatever you are, you are not wanted here; moreover, you won't be had here. I suspect some scheme to rescue the prisoner, but your game won't work. You see the street yonder, of course. Try the walking there."

Sowders protested against this verdict, but all in vain. The officer was firm, and he was forced to beat a retreat. He went directly to a certain house in the village, and when his knock had brought a woman to the door, abruptly said:

"Tell Miss Heath she is wanted."

"Miss Heath is not here," was the reply.

"Gone out for a walk?"

"Worse than that. She is supposed to have been kidnapped by enemies. At any rate she has mysteriously disappeared, and there can be no doubt that she is in serious trouble of some sort."

Sowders whistled in surprise, and then asked for particulars. They were given, and he seemed very much annoyed. Floralice had disappeared and he had no clew to her whereabouts. He had many questions to ask, but, when he saw how useless questioning was, gave it up and went away.

"Strange!" he muttered, as he went down the street. "It seems to be a missing family. Here I have just got my grip in the matter, and a slight hope of winning Floralice's gratitude—perhaps her heart—and now she disappears like the morning dew. It is confounded hard luck!"

And then he went to solace himself with talk concerning the Knight murder case.

Conrad was held prisoner in a room at the hotel, guarded by Pray and another man, while Boyne looked for fresh evidence against him; but as none was forthcoming, and the detective did not in the least like Buck Basin, he decided to take his prisoner away that night.

Word was accordingly sent to Edwina that she could come and bid her husband good-by, and they were granted the privilege of an interview lasting half an hour. Then she was sent out, and preparations were made for departure.

All Buck Basin knew that Conrad was to be taken away, and men, women and children gathered to see him go. Nearly all were in sympathy with the prisoner, but they were law-abiding people and their feelings were kept under good control.

Finally the official party emerged from the hotel door. Conrad was ironed, and Boyne walked on one side and Pray on the other. The detective had profited by experience and, though on the alert, was quiet and reserved of manner, but Pray regarded these spectators as dust under his feet, and offensive dust, at that, and did not hesitate to show the fact.

The people had formed in two lines, and the official party started through them, but only a few steps had been taken when Edwina darted forward and threw her arms around Conrad's neck.

"Oh, no, no!" she wildly cried; "don't take him away. He is all I have, and my heart is breaking. Don't take him away—you shall not!"

Pray uttered an oath, and seizing her rudely, flung her backward into the crowd.

"Keep out of this, you beggar! Hands off, or I'll have you arrested and—"

"Stop!"

It was a deep, impressive voice from the crowd, and there stood the Old Brigadier with one arm thrown protectingly about the young wife. He had never looked more noble and impressive, and a flush of indignation dyed his cheeks. Even his inoffensive nature was stirred by such rough treatment of a stricken woman, and Pray was met by a glance that did not flinch.

"I am the protector of this poor child," the Old Brigadier added, "and you will molest her at your peril. Who dares do it?"

Boyne saw danger in the air, for the men of Buck Basin, peaceful as they were, were but human, and a word from a leader at a crisis is like the touch of fire to tinder. He was hastening to reply pacifically, but Pray was ahead of him.

"Ha! is this a riot?" cried the agent, hotly. "Maybe you want to go to jail yourself, and you will go if you interfere with officers in the discharge of their duty. Carry this any further, and you will keep Conrad company in the lock-up."

"Evan Conrad will not go to prison!" Brigadier Baldy steadily answered.

"Carefully, Benmarsh," interrupted Boyne.

"Surely, you are too old to incite rebellion to the law."

"I have no wish to do so, but when I say he will not go to prison it is because he is an innocent man. Evan Conrad had no share in Shaffer Knight's death. I am here to save him, and to deliver the real criminal into your hands."

"Oh, Brigadier, save him!" cried Edwina. "I will save. Listen to me, Bernard Boyne! You have arrested an innocent man, but the real criminal is within your reach. He is ready to surrender himself, and to confess."

"What jugglery is this?" Boyne incredulously demanded. "I am not to be deceived by a trick. Show me your alleged criminal. Where is he?"

"Here!" replied the Old Brigadier, in a deep voice. "Look at me and you will see him. Release Conrad, who is wholly innocent, and take the real criminal. I, and I alone, murdered Shaffer Knight!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A NEW HAND AT THE WHEEL.

PRISONER, officers and spectators stared at Brigadier Baldy in mute amazement. Nothing else that could have happened would have surprised them so much as this astounding assertion. The kind old Brigadier was the last man whom they would have supposed capable of harming a human being.

But he, heedless of the sensation he had caused, still stood erect and soldier-like, his noble face calm and peaceful of expression. The eventful step was taken, and his heart could not be more heavily stricken than it was already.

"I am the prisoner whom you should take, and the only one," he added. "I killed Shaffer Knight, or, rather, left him to die. It is all one; I ask no favor. I have kept silent, hoping you would fail to find a clew, but will not see an innocent man suffer. Conrad is innocent."

"This is incredible," said Boyne, in perplexity.

"It is true."

"But why should you kill Knight?"

"'Tis too long a story to tell here. Take me to prison and I will give the whole in detail."

"A better way will be to hear your story here. Pray, we will not leave Buck Basin tonight. We'll adjourn to the hotel and hear this man's story."

The speaker knew the value of prompt action in an emergency, and as he feared that the villagers might rise in a body to aid their idol, the Old Brigadier, he took measures to get his party back into the hotel with such good judgment that it was done before the former fully recovered from their stupefaction. Conrad was not released, but close watch was kept over both him and the Brigadier.

Then the crowd found their tongues, and they talked a good deal, if not to the point. Everybody had something to say, but as no two agreed it amounted to but little. Kind friends took Edwina in, nearly prostrated, and the greater part of the people remained in front of the hotel waiting for news.

They waited for hours, but nothing definite came. A consultation was going on in Boyne's room, but opinions were divided as to the result. Some thought that Conrad would be free in the morning; others declared that even Boyne must see that the Brigadier had falsely accused himself to save Conrad.

No one thought that their "bulwark" could be guilty.

It was late when the crowd broke up and went to their homes, but they were astir early in the morning and flocking to the hotel to learn the latest news.

The landlord said he knew nothing about the matter, but to a favored few he gave the information that Edgar Hendrickson had come back just before daybreak, and, learning the news, had earnestly requested the host to get him a chance to speak with Brigadier Baldy.

Circumstances made this possible, and there had been an interview between the two men, but Hendrickson had been non-committal as to the result. He had, however, been flying in and out of the hotel ever since, the speaker added.

Unconscious of this activity on the part of a man he had hardly noticed, Bernard Boyne arose and began preparations for departure. Unable to decide whether the story told by Brigadier Baldy ought to be believed, and suspicious that it was a mere sacrifice to save Conrad, he had decided to take both men along with him, and let a higher authority decide as to who was guilty.

He had said that they would go immediately after breakfast, and though he rose late, he hurried matters when once up.

He was just finishing breakfast when a man entered the room unannounced. It was Hendrickson. Boyne frowned at the intrusion, but as he could not afford to anger any one at Buck Basin, let it pass and greeted the newcomer civilly.

"You'll excuse me," said Hendrickson, quietly; "but I heard you were about to go, and I have a word to say before then. It is about Evan Conrad. He is not guilty, and as it would

be a slight inconvenience to jail him for five or six months, I must request that you don't take him."

"You'll excuse me," Boyne replied; "but neither you nor I can judge his case. It must go to a higher source."

"I propose to convince you differently."

"Do you speak for the village people?"

"I speak for myself alone."

"Then I must ask you to let the matter alone. I am a detective in the lawful discharge of my duty, and I warn you not to interfere."

"I am extremely sorry to disappoint you, but it must be so. I give two reasons for my course—first, I, too, am a detective; second, I was on the case before you, and have what you lack—the facts of the case."

"You'll have to prove that you are a detective before I believe you," Boyne retorted. "I am not to be humbugged."

"On the contrary, you are easily humbugged. As for me, read these papers."

He placed several on the table before Boyne. They were conclusive, several being letters from the most prominent police chiefs in the country, and the reader found himself obliged to yield a point. He did it with a bad grace, adding:

"You say you have the facts in the Knight case. Where, then, is your prisoner?"

"We'll talk of that when I've got rid of yours. First, let me prove that you have made a blunder. Come in!"

He spoke the last words in an elevated voice, and the door opened and Brian Markoe, Clarence Webber and Game Chicken entered. Brian was pale and his face bore a hunted look, while Webber seemed very weak from some cause, and was supported by the ex-pugilist's strong arm. He was at once helped to a chair, where he sat, looking so wretched in every way that even Boyne was surprised.

"We will now hear the truth about Conrad," said Hendrickson, quietly. "Markoe, tell us what you know about it."

Brian moved restlessly.

"All the evidence against him is a lie," he answered, nervously. "Shaffer Knight came to Buck Basin on a false errand. He had been informed by letter that Conrad was about to flee with the proceeds of his crops and leave Sinclair Rhodes in the lurch. The letter was a lie. I wrote it."

"Tell us why," said Hendrickson, coolly.

"I hated Conrad because he was to marry Edwina Vane. I loved her, too. When I saw that she was going to him I thirsted for revenge. I put up the job with Clarence Webber as my aid, and, as far as I know, Conrad never meditated improper conduct toward Rhodes. Knight came on a false clew."

"Well, I don't see that this touches on the murder," said Boyne, tartly, as Markoe ceased speaking. "This don't clear Conrad in the least. No matter why Knight came here, it is still my opinion that Conrad killed him. By his own confession he was walking alone by the river the night of the murder, and at the hour. Unless you have more evidence I shall hang to my prisoner."

"No, you won't," retorted Hendrickson.

"Do you dare interfere?"

"Yes."

"Beware, sir! I will make it hot for you if you run against the law."

"Oh! you bet heavy on the law, do you? Well, you shall have your fill of it. Let me introduce more friends."

He strode to the door, opened it, and three more persons entered. They were Hugh Benmarsh, his wife and their child.

Boyne started to his feet and turned pale. Ever since the adventure in his room when he saw some one who looked like Hugh he had been on nettles, and all his efforts to convince himself that it had been imagination had not served to put his fears to rest.

Now he was the most frightened man in Kansas.

Hugh Benmarsh was in one of the stronger periods of his variable illness; excitement and hope had given him fictitious power; and he advanced a step and pointed an accusing finger at the man who cowered before him.

"I see that you recognize me, Ralph Edwards!" he said, in a deep voice, "and the brand of guilt is on your face. Justice has come home to you, even though you hide under an assumed name."

"Stop! stop!" huskily exclaimed the startled detective. "Don't say anything, and—and I will make it all right."

"The law will make it all right!" Hugh retorted. "False friend, criminal, forger, the wrong shall be righted at last!"

Perspiration stood on Boyne's forehead in great drops, and he looked the picture of despair.

"It was a mistake!" he cried. "I will convince you that I am innocent—"

"Innocent! Proof is overwhelming. Would an innocent man have let another suffer? You have run your race, Ralph Edwards, and the truth will now be known. It would have been known long ago, but with the long run of evil luck which has been mine since first you placed

me in trouble, I fell under the ban of another crime of which I was equally innocent. For that crime I went to prison, served awhile, was strangely rescued, hid in the strangest of places, and only a day since was re-arrested. What would have been my fate I don't know, but at the critical moment comes a telegram that the real criminal has confessed and the officers have released their claim on me. I am saved, not only in that respect, but from the false charge laid upon me by your infamous conduct. But you—you shall have your deserts. No longer shall you hide under a false name, but justice shall have its due."

"Just so," coolly added Hendrickson. "I arrest you, Ralph Edwards, alias Bernard Boyne, for forgery."

"If it is done I will not suffer alone," cried the accused man, fiercely. "Hugh Benmarsh, I dare you to press this charge. Do it, and your father shall go to the gallows. Ay, Adam Benmarsh has confessed that he killed—murdered—Shaffer Knight, and he suffers the extreme penalty if you molest me. Let me go free and I will keep his secret. Arrest me, and he hangs for murder!"

A wild, startled look had appeared on Hugh's face.

"Monster!" he cried, "you lie! You have told a foul falsehood! I will choke the truth from you!"

And he sprung forward and seized Boyne by the throat.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A STORY OF SHADOWED LIVES.

THE attack had been made so suddenly that Hendrickson could not prevent it, but he lost no time in averting serious consequences. He hastened to their side and separated the old enemies before Boyne could return Hugh's assault. The latter stood panting in Hendrickson's grasp, but upon a few whispered words was prevailed upon to go to a seat, where his faithful wife hovered tenderly over him.

"Let there be no tragedy here," said the detective, quietly, for my drama is not half acted.

As he spoke the door once more opened, and Game Chicken, who had gone out a few moments before, in obedience to a signal from his chief, returned, leading a woman by the hand. He made a deep bow, and ceremoniously said:

"Ladies an' gents, Miss Floralice Heath!"

There was a quick cry from Eulalie, and some who were there were surprised to see her and Floralice rush to an embrace which was as warm as it was unexpected.

Hendrickson looked coolly at Boyne.

"Perhaps you know them both," he said.

"They are Floralice and Eulalie Heath, sisters. You knew of them vaguely in the old days, I believe. There was another sister, Frances. Of them I have a story to tell, with a few words thrown in about Brigadier Baldy and others."

The two girls had been showering kisses upon each other, but, even though deeply moved, Floralice did not lose her usual self-possession. She suddenly turned to Hendrickson, and, still holding Eulalie's hand, bade him speak.

He gave a short, quick nod.

"I will begin at the very beginning, and make my story as brief as possible. It is a sad one for all concerned, but there is good reason to believe that the sun is now shining through the clouds."

"Brigadier Baldy, though twice married, never had but one child. This was a son, born shortly after his first marriage, the boy's name being Hugh."

"All accounts agree that he was a bright, frank and honest boy, but he was not without a spirit of mischief. Few boys are. All went well until the second Mrs. Benmarsh came; after that, nothing went well. Her precious offspring, young Webber, was as mean, crafty and contemptible then as in former years, and he and Hugh soon fell out."

"The final result of their quarrels was that Hugh begged to be sent away to school, and as the Old Brigadier's heart had been about broken by the conduct of his new wife and Clarence, the request was granted. He was short of money, but he determined to economize in every way to help his boy along."

"Hugh, too, made a resolution; he was determined to pay his way through school if possible. He was a fine penman, and when once located he looked about for a chance to turn his skill to pecuniary advantage. His first attempts were not very successful, but his second year at school found him regularly employed as a copyist at fair pay."

"The many rebuffs he had at first met with had led to his giving an assumed name when applying for a chance, and before he fairly realized the fact he found himself known to quite a circle of acquaintances as 'Byron Brooks.' He would probably have explained the matter to them, but he had made the acquaintance of a young man of his own age, whose name was Edwards, and the latter's persuasion caused him to retain the name."

"Edwards was a gay young man about town, and it was through him that young Benmarsh

made certain acquaintances which were destined to color his whole life."

"Among them was Frances Heath, who fell desperately in love with him. He admired her for a time, but was just discovering that she had a fierce, revengeful nature when, through Edwards, he was introduced to a young actress, who at once won his heart, and caused him to forget Frances entirely."

"The actress he knew only by her stage name, and it was not until they had become engaged that he learned that she was Frances Heath's sister, Eulalie."

"The father of the girls was then living—a man who was as stern, harsh and proud as he was poor. He had bitterly resented Eulalie's engagement on the stage, and when the girl was asked by the poor young student to become his wife, she dared not tell her father."

"He expected her to marry a rich man, and would never forgive a second transgression of his wishes. The result was a secret marriage. I will not comment on the wisdom, or lack of it, shown by Hugh and Eulalie; enough to say that they were married."

"Even the bride's sisters did not suspect that she had become a wife. To her Hugh had dutifully revealed his real name, but it was still kept secret from Frances and Floralice, the latter of whom seldom saw young 'Brooks.'"

"Perhaps all would have ended well had not our student's friend, Edwards, proved himself a consummate scoundrel. This is how he proved it: One evening he prevailed upon Benmarsh to drink champagne. The young man was not used to it; it flew to his head."

"Then Edwards bantered him about his skill as a penman, expressed doubt, and after a proper degree of preparation got Hugh to imitate the signatures of a dozen prominent men. All were written on common paper but one. When that was to be written Edwards tossed over a blank check and said:

"Sign this time on that. I'll fill it out with half a dozen ciphers and have a joke on the boys."

"You must remember that Hugh was a mere boy and that the wine was working in his head. He signed."

"He thought no more about the matter for several days. Then the city rung with the news of a daring forgery. Edwards had sprung his trap and secured the money. He had run away and left Hugh to bear the blame, and the police had a clew—'Byron Brooks' was wanted."

"The poor boy was utterly overwhelmed, but he made no efforts at first to escape. He would bear the punishment—he knew that his explanation of the affair would not be believed in any court. Then he thought of Eulalie and determined to make one effort for life. He fled, taking her with him."

"Before he went he wrote to the Old Brigadier telling the whole story and asserting his innocence of all wrong intentions, but dwelling so upon the disgrace which he had brought upon his father that it was plain to be seen what he thought of most."

"It was a terrible blow to the Old Brigadier. He never doubted his boy's innocence, but all the plans he had formed for the boy's future had gone to ruin at one blow, and his virago wife's taunts cut like poisoned barbs."

"Eulalie's father was furious. His daughter had fled with a FORGER! It almost stunned the man who in poverty and lowliness was as proud as the average prince, and he soon went the way of all earth."

"He left one behind who could hate as bitterly as he—Frances. She did not care for the disgrace on the family name, but the fact that her love had been so lightly cast aside, as she thought, and that Eulalie had won the prize, almost maddened her."

"She vowed revenge on them both as though they had done anything for which she could blame them."

"Neither she nor Floralice were much at home after their father's death—the place being cared for by an aunt—but both were there when, after a year, Eulalie returned, pale, sad, almost broken-hearted. She told a sad story. They had been living in another city, and her husband had mysteriously disappeared. She feared foul play. The sisters believed he had deliberately deserted his young wife, or so they said. Floralice was sincere. What of Frances?"

"She never forgave Eulalie for innocently winning Hugh away from her, and her hot temper suggested revenge. Proud as the father of the family had been, he had once committed a worse mistake in marriage than to wed poverty. Twice married, his first choice had been a Gypsy girl; a wild young creature who ran away at the end of a year and left him Frances, a mere babe, as the only palpable recollection of her."

"Frances had all her mother's temper, and she determined to be revenged on Eulalie and Hugh. And though her sister did not suspect it, Frances was responsible for Hugh's disappearance. Even when Eulalie had come home as before stated, she was not content. She wrote a note to Eulalie, forging Hugh's hand and signing his name, in which she asserted that Eulalie's marriage was not legal."

"But she overdid the matter that time; the

horror-stricken younger sister fled the house and it was long before Frances saw her again."

"In the meanwhile, what had she done with Hugh? I will briefly tell. Her agents kidnapped him; he was taken to a distant city and held prisoner until his jailer pretended to relent. He gave Hugh a check, which the latter was to get cashed, to get money to go back to Eulalie. The check was a forgery; he was arrested, tried and sentenced to prison."

"There he gave the name of Allen Gray, determined to serve his time and not let his real name be disgraced. His time was nearly up—a very short sentence, thanks to a merciful judge—when Frances rescued him from prison, as some of you already know. She had as an ally a man named Sam Sloane, who waited outside to do her bidding."

"They first pretended to drown Hugh in the river, and nearly did so, to 'frighten' him, as they called it, and then delivered him over to the keepers of a private asylum for the insane."

"It was thought that this would prove a living grave, but by some wonder Hugh at once won a hold on the head of the doctor—not on his heart, for he had none—and was made a highly-honored employee."

"To bind him to his service more closely, the doctor searched for and found Eulalie, who had been supporting herself by hard work after fleeing from the old home; and she and their child went to the asylum."

"The year that followed was peaceful and happy to them, despite their surroundings. Then the asylum was burned, and Hugh barely saved his wife and child, all three escaping by walking on the window caps, and then descending the fire-escape. They were separated in the crowd, and did not come together again until they met at Buck Basin."

"The principal cause of this was that the officials of the prison from which Hugh had been released by Frances, alias Horace Ames, were again on his track. They hunted him hotly, and finally arrested him here, and it would have gone hard with him had not word come by telegraph that they could release their prey. The real criminal had been discovered."

"Hugh Benmarsh stands to-day without a cloud on his reputation, and for the first time he is situated so that he can punish the author of his first trouble. Ralph Edwards-Boyne, as I said before, you are arrested for forgery!"

Boyne had been gathering courage, and a cold sneer now passed over his face.

"As I said before, I'll make it hot for those who molest me. Let Hugh Benmarsh prosecute at his peril. I hold the life of his father in the hollow of my hand. The Old Brigadier, as you call him, is the murderer of Shaffer Knight. He goes to the gallows if I am prosecuted. I swear it!"

"We will now discuss that point," Hendrickson coolly said. "Game Chicken, will you bring the Brigadier in?"

"He has confessed to both me and Pray, and no lie will save him," Boyne declared. "It's liberty for both, or a prison for me and the gallows for him!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN WHICH THE RECORD CLOSES.

HENDRICKSON smiled slightly.

"At all events, we will have Brigadier Baldy in," he answered, coolly.

Hugh looked very anxious, but faithful Eulalie clung to his hand, and Floralice stood at their side and seemed a protector for both. Game Chicken had gone out, and they were not long kept waiting. He returned accompanied by the Old Brigadier and Ebenezer Pray.

The latter looked worried and angry, but the Brigadier was as calm and peaceful of face as ever. His eyes beamed kindly on Hugh and his loved ones, but beyond a general nod he greeted no one.

Before even Hendrickson could speak the door was unceremoniously thrown open and Mrs. Benmarsh dashed into the room, her sharp face flushed and her eyes darting figurative flashes of fire.

"Where's my dear boy?" she cried. "They say he has been wounded, and if he has, I'll kill the man who did it. Who dared harm my poor, innocent, kind-hearted Clarry? He's like a lamb led to the slaughter!"

She had swooped down upon Clarence and was fondling him as though he had been a baby. She was an uninvited witness, but Hendrickson smiled quietly. He was not sorry to see her there.

"Now, Boyne," Hendrickson resumed, "we'll see what weight you carry. You say Adam Benmarsh killed Shaffer Knight."

"He has confessed it."

"It is only too true," the Old Brigadier added.

"Will you kindly give me this story in full?"

"I object!" cried Boyne. "He is my prisoner."

"And you are mine!" Hendrickson retorted. "More than this, you will be silent or I shall force you to be so."

Boyne looked as though he would gladly have done his fellow detective harm, but the fates were against him. He settled sullenly back in

his chair, and Brigadier Baldy gave a simple, concise account of that night when Shaffer Knight had fallen into the Arrow River. He attempted no more extenuation than when his conscience had been his only listener, and proclaimed himself Knight's slayer because he had not promptly answered the agent's cries for help.

Hugh looked dumfounded at this confession, but before he could utter the vehement assertion that this in no way constituted murder, Hendrickson followed the Brigadier as speaker:

"I have a few words to say here. As most of you now know I am a detective, and though here on an utterly different mission, I at once became interested in the Knight tragedy when the body was found, or, rather, after I returned to Buck Basin.

"Certain facts at once attracted my attention, chief among which was that everybody here was so in fear of Ebenezer Pray that they had no opinions of their own. There were other facts which showed Pray to be most remarkably stupid. He had rushed to the conclusion that Knight had been murdered and thrown in the river, and his body then washed ashore at the point where it was found.

"His whole theory was a bubble which any intelligent man ought to have pricked. At that point Arrow River flows almost sluggishly, yet the body was high and dry, two feet from the water. When I learned this, I knew it had never been cast up by the river. Pray had also argued that Knight died the night that he came to Buck Basin, but the condition of the body when found conclusively proved that death must have come at a much later time.

"Perhaps you think I am advancing evidence that conflicts with what Brigadier Baldy has said. You shall hear in the sequel; I will now give the facts in regard to Shaffer Knight's death.

"The man could not swim, and when he fell into the river through his own hot-tempered efforts, he was very much frightened and began to call for help. Luckily, the abutments of the bridge created a sluggish surface at points, and there, even now, you may see floating matter, from leaves up to boards, which is held temporarily and, occasionally, sent away again.

"Shaffer Knight chanced to lay hold of one of these objects—a dry log—and it kept him from drowning. He was so frightened, however, that he could not call for help any further, and then drifted down the river.

"It was not until he had passed the village that he gained courage to try and make the bank. When he did try he succeeded, and he dropped helpless to the earth, overcome with fright and physical weakness.

"While in this condition he was found by a certain man of the village who took him to his house. When Knight recovered somewhat he wanted to go on. Now, his temporary host had been bled unmercifully by the agent, and, being of a revengeful nature, he determined to get square with him. Instead of letting him go, he overpowered and made him a prisoner.

"By the next morning he was cooler. He had rashly taken an elephant upon his hands. What was he to do with him? Result, he sent for a friend, and they decided to hold Knight until he paid a ransom of a thousand dollars, and then take the money and flee. Knight, however, stoutly refused.

"That night they urged him again, and he agreed to write a check for one thousand dollars. They released his hands. When this was done he suddenly attacked them furiously, and a desperate fight followed. When it was over Shaffer Knight lay dead at their feet; a chance blow had instantly killed him.

"Whether they were dismayed I don't know, but they were certainly afraid of detection. They held a consultation, and, as a result, the body was borne to the river and left on the bank to give the idea of accidental death by drowning. This is how Knight met his fate."

Momentary silence followed his last words. Then Hugh Benmarsh eagerly demanded:

"Can you prove this?"

"I can," Hendrickson serenely replied. "One of the slayers has confessed. He sits there; his name is Clarence Webber!"

A wild cry rung out in the room, and Mrs. Benmarsh shook her fist frantically in the air.

"No, no!" she cried, "it is a lie! My poor, innocent boy would never harm any one! How dare you insult my Clarry? I'll have the law of you!"

Hendrickson made a motion to Game Chicken, who promptly took the excited woman from the room. They did not intend to be harsh with her, virago that she was, but she could not be allowed to rave when more important things were to be said.

Webber sat with drooping head, utterly crushed. Even Brian Markoe was astonished. He had wondered at Clarence's sudden withdrawal from active warfare against Evan Conrad, but had never suspected the cause.

"A few days ago," added Hendrickson, "Webber kidnapped Floralice Heath and put her in charge of Hagar Lee and her tribe. I rescued her. They laid a trap to murder me, but it went wrong, and Webber and Nat Lee

did some shooting at each other by accident. I was fleeing from the place, but, meeting my allies, Game Chicken and Nick, outside, went back and learned the truth.

"I found both desperately wounded. Lee lies at the cave, but it is doubtful if even his mother can pull him through. Webber I have brought here, but he says himself that his wound is fatal. I believe it is."

Not a word said Clarence; he sat with drooping head, helpless and hopeless.

Hendrickson turned to Brigadier Baldy.

"I have been gathering up threads of this case, and though I could prove nothing until Webber confessed, I can corroborate him in many ways. Adam Benmarsh, there is no stain on your record. You are as free from crime as any man here. I congratulate you!"

There were others to congratulate him, too, and Hugh, in particular was overjoyed. His father, as well as himself, was cleared from every cloud. The Old Brigadier's face had never looked more noble, but his gratitude was mixed with an emotion peculiar to his great heart.

He thanked Heaven for his release from the shadow of guilt, but, evil as Clarence Webber had been, he deeply pitied the young man.

Suddenly the door was opened and Game Chicken appeared.

"There's a young female hyar who—"

He had spoken no further when he was thrust aside and Leah Lee stood in the room, her great dark eyes flashing and her cheeks aglow.

"So you are all here!" she cried, in a high, hard voice. "By the master I serve, I am glad to see you. Bernard Boyne, you are a detective. I command you to arrest that vile woman!"

She pointed to Floralice.

"Upon what charge?" promptly demanded Hendrickson.

"She set fire to Doctor Leibson's insane asylum and nearly destroyed scores of people. Aha! my fine lady, you shall not escape justice. I suppose I shall be arrested, but I came here from the cave to unmask you, and I'll do it. You shall suffer, too; I care not what becomes of myself."

"The last part is all right," said Hendrickson, nonchalantly, "but as for the fire, I have a letter from Doctor Leibson which says he had discovered its source to be purely accidental."

"It is false!" cried the dusky-faced girl, wildly. "You know it is false! You would lie blindly for her now, as you did before—"

"Be silent, Frances Heath! Your day is past, and you may as well accept your defeat gracefully. Look at the sisters you have wronged so bitterly, and wonder that they have told me you can go unpunished. Is it not so, Floralice and Eulalie?"

Both answered in the affirmative, but neither looked at her. They could not bear the sight.

"Young woman," added Game Chicken, "you may suspect you ain't wanted hyar. Ther sooner you sample ther walkin' on ther road which leads from Buck Basin, ther better 'twill be."

And he took her arm and led her out, before she could recover her presence of mind.

"The sky clears," said Hendrickson, "and I think nobody need fear future trouble from this case who deserves happiness. You, Evan Conrad, are free to go to your wife. Brigadier Baldy, there has been a heavy weight upon your mind, but it is removed. You can go among your fellow-men now, knowing that no one can criticize or blame you, and that you have the respect of all your fellow-men."

The Old Brigadier turned, gave one hand to Hugh and laid the other on Eulalie's head.

"I thank heaven," he said, in a trembling voice, "that it is so. I would not have these dear ones troubled by having a criminal father!"

Even in that supreme moment, his thoughts were of others than himself.

A brighter day dawned on Buck Basin. It was soon shown that Sinclair Rhodes had been ignorant of his agents' misdeeds; that they had been grinding the tenants to enrich themselves, not him; and he did justice to all. The tenants were given a chance on the land of which they could not complain, while Ebenezer Pray went to prison as a reward for his embezzlement.

"Bernard Boyne" kept him company, being tried and sentenced for the old forgery.

Brian Markoe found it convenient to hurriedly leave Buck Basin, and Tom Sowders, who brought Floralice news of Eulalie too late, accepted a small reward and faded from sight. His detective work had not been very successful.

It was not known for some time whether Nat Lee lived or died, as the Gypsy family suddenly disappeared. A year later they were heard of in Wisconsin, and all were alive. They were really distant relatives of Leah—or, rather, Frances Heath—and had been paid to serve her, and help along her schemes, when she partially disguised herself and assumed the role of a Gypsy. Not for the sake of the blood-tie, for they had barely known her mother, but for her money had they aided her, and when her power ceased the dusky people went their way.

Frances promptly entered a convent and is dead to the world. Whether she repented those who knew her do not pretend to say.

When she rescued Hugh from prison to wreak further vengeance on him, he at first mistook her for Floralice, and, calling the latter name, put Hendrickson on a false trail.

As for the contradictory scene at the asylum, when Frances placed him there she had said that Floralice was the prime mover in the work. The latter knew this, and as she really did not know whether Hugh was worthy or evil, allowed the falsehood to stand. As for him, after Doctor Leibson took a fancy to him, employed him and gave shelter to him, his wife and child, he had a part to play; and the rags he wore on that eventful occasion were assumed to carry out the imposture on his supposed enemy.

One of the slayers of Shaffer Knight was given a long sentence for the crime. It was a man unknown to this chronicle. Clarence Webber was never tried, for he died of the wound inflicted by Nat Lee. His mother railed at everybody for a few days, and then to the relief of all fled from those who had known her.

It was a blessing to Brigadier Baldy. The last cloud was gone from his life, and in the happy home made by Hugh the veteran is supremely happy. All of the household are happy. It seems to them that fate showers on them its choicest blessings. Freed from every shadow Hugh works with a will and is rapidly becoming comfortably rich, and Eulalie and their boy are treasures in his eyes.

And all love the Old Brigadier. Not one who knows him but will declare him the noblest of men, and he advances toward the sunset of his life with a heart which daily blesses Providence for his great good-fortune, even as others bless him for his wonderful tenderness and honor.

Evan Conrad is a neighbor, and he and Edwina are prosperous. No shadow of the old trouble remains. Among Conrad's employees, at present, are Game Chicken and the boy, Nick.

After clearing up all mysteries, Edgar Hendrickson only remained in Buck Basin to hunt down and arrest the men who once tried to lynch him. Then he went East, but before his departure there was a wedding and Floralice became Mrs. Hendrickson. Convinced that she had committed no crime, he was willing she should possess a will of her own. He has never regretted his choice.

And thus the curtain falls.

THE END.

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